Painted By Stone

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/51299287.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	LEGO Monkie Kid
Relationships:	Liu Er Mihou	Six-eared Macaque & Sun Wukong	Monkey King, Ao Lie	West Sea Third Prince & Sun Wukong	Monkey King
Characters:	Sun Wukong	Monkey King, Liu Er Mihou	Six-eared Macaque, Zhu Bajie	Pigsy (Monkie Kid), Ao Lie	White Horse Dragon (Monkie Kid), Sha Wujing	Sandy (Monkie Kid), Qi Xiaotian	MK, Long Xiaojiao	Mei, Tang Sanzang	Tripataka (Monkie Kid)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Role Reversal, Family, Hurt/Comfort, Other Additional Tags to Be Added
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-11-02 Updated: 2023-12-06 Words: 37,900 Chapters: 6/?

Painted By Stone

by MetanteiIdolRachel

Summary

Wukong loved a lot of things about the world. However, there's just something else about stories– legends, specifically.
That didn't mean that he wanted legend to become real, though, but he'll give it to previously-thought-to-be-fictional legends, their world was way cooler.

OR: Another Role Reversal fic, but this one is the Journey To The West in reverse.

Chapter 1: A King's Coronation

Wukong loved a lot of things about the world. Peaches, being one of them– but the world was large and infinitely fascinating. However, there's just something else about stories– legends, specifically. They weren't real, and the world would do just fine without them, but legends were a whole other universe entirely. If one world is already a force to be reckoned with on its own, then what is another– one with places he could never go to and people he could never meet? Those were the things that Wukong to them.

His particular favorite was a hero from ancient times– the Harbinger of Chaos.

"The Harbinger of Chaos was a wild soul," Sanzang began. "He was an agent of unpredictability, an unknown variable in the heavens' perfect equation. If the heavens wanted something, then it was a complete coin toss on where the Harbinger would stand with it.

"One day, a fallen celestial warrior named the Azure Lion sought to destroy humanity. As the heavens waited patiently for their time to strike, the Harbinger appeared from the fog of the mountains, swinging a magical staff and defeating the Azure Lion in just a few blows! The lion heeled, defeated by the Harbinger. The heavens braced themselves, for they did not know what the Harbinger's next move would be. Yet they were once again surprised when the Harbinger broke off the top of a nearby mountain and buried the Azure Lion underneath it!

"The Harbinger didn't say a word despite heaven's demands. He simply left the staff at the summit of the once-great mountain that buried such an undefeatable force and disappeared without another word, never to appear again…"

Wujing clapped from the counter seat next to Sanzang, impressed by the storytelling. In the process, he accidentally knocked his glass off the counter. Sanzang darted over and quickly caught it before it shattered. Wukong was much more vocal about his appreciation, cheers echoing off the walls of the small hole in the wall noodle place in his excitement.

"Aw man! That was *awesome!!* Mr. Sanzang, you should get a job at a studio or something. You're *so* much better than the people in charge of writing the Harbinger of Chaos cartoons," Wukong said, propping his hands on the counter.

"That's very kind of you, Wukong," Sanzang replied, "I'm a scholar! I've dedicated my entire life to deciphering ancient stories and history from texts older than Megapolis itself."

"Everything about the Harbinger is cool! Reborn from his name on the scrolls of the underworld, his blood can change a person's fate, he can bring back the dead, and to top it all off, is like, the *strongest* guy in the entire celestial realm?" Wukong rambled, climbing onto the tabletop as if the whole world needed to know.

"He's not the *strongest* guy," Sanzang corrected. "His abilities just put everyone at a disadvantage."

“Makes you wonder doesn’t it?” Wujing said, “What that says about some people’s nature– instead of working on their own advantages in order to succeed, the Harbinger preys on people’s weaknesses and drags them down to his level and uses them as stepping stones.”

“You say that like you don’t love him as much as Wukong does,” Sanzang scoffed.

Wujing chuckled nervously, scratching his chin over his beard. “Well, what can I say? He’s still really cool.”

“RIGHT?” Wukong squealed.

“ *Wu~kong~!* ,” a voice singsonged. Everyone’s attention was drawn to Macaque coming out from behind the cloth curtains separating the counter from the kitchen, carrying a tray full of paper bags of freshly cooked take out. “*Wukong* , you have five seconds to explain to me why your last batch of orders is still here. With you,” he growled, pointedly glaring at the space on the counter meant for deliveries—a space still overflowing with takeout bags.

“Re*lax* , Mac, I was just taking a break!” Wukong laughed, only to promptly be shoved off the table by a mop.

“Sun. Wu. Kong.”

Wukong rubbed his head in a daze, not fully processing the figure of a pig standing above him—one very pissed looking pig at that. His vision doubled for a moment before two pigs became one, only then did he realize how deep into his grave he was.

“Oh! Bajie, hi!!”

“Why are you still here?!” Bajie yelled, slamming the handle of the mop onto the floor to make his point. “Those noodles aren’t going to deliver themselves, you know!?”

“I was just—“

“OUT!!!”

=O=

Wukong would call himself a master of focus, except for this one time.

“How did I even get here?” Wukong asked himself in whispers. “It’s *literally* a construction elevator straight to the bottom of the city! Shouldn’t I at least have asked myself *‘Hey, isn’t this a little dangerous?’* or, *‘Hey, I can’t afford to* not *do my job right now!’* But nooo, I just *had* to go, *‘Oooooh, I wonder where this leads?'* Good job, Wukong, Macaque will never let you live this down!”

Wukong hung onto dear life in the pipes above what was an oddly green field. There was even a lush tree growing in the middle of it all! What plant sprouts one morning and thinks, *hm, yes, these are* perfect *conditions to flourish in* ?!

Wukong wasn't the only one here; there were paper dolls standing around like soldiers, the ones he only sees in the older and more traditional funeral stores. Except instead of young cup bearers, they were more akin to jiangshi—with little hats and braids and talismans on their foreheads. In front of the army was an avian and an elephant demon—both of which are rare in Megapolis. Demons were already often looked down upon, but Megapolis's cramped nature made it hard for larger citizens to live comfortably, and the distance between the ground and the sky was more than enough to keep any flying demons from approaching the city with a hundred meter staff.

And speaking of staffs, there was one, right now, on the peak of the small hill, right under the tree and just at the right angle so that the leaves didn't block it from Wukong's view.

Wukong almost laughed at how similar it was to how he drew the Harbinger of Chaos's staff in his Personal, Unauthorized Copy of the Harbinger of Chaos's Unofficial Biography—from the golden ends to the violently scarlet shaft, except laughing would give away his position, and he was in no mood to let this day go from bad to worse.

"Are you sure this will work, Yellowtusk?" the avian demon asked, arms crossed.

"No."

The avian did not appear amused at that.

"I simply speak the truth, Peng. It's not as if this was something we could've tested beforehand."

"Well, it *better*. Finally, after five hundred years, we can free our dear brother—Azure Lion!" Peng declared, raising their arms as the projection of golden wings sprouting from their back, because of *course* the villains had to be dramatic.

Wukong scoffed, turning to a nearby bird—his newfound companion in this predicament, though the bird definitely didn't understand the weight of the situation. Wukong himself didn't, but the bird even less so. It was a nice hazelnut colored little thing that probably lived in the large tree down there and only came up here because the visitors were being loud.

"Delusional aren't they?" Wukong softly asked the bird.

Except the bird stared back, a touch *too* intently for Wukong's liking.

Wukong was going to pretend he didn't see that.

Yellowtusk approached the staff, pulling out a slip of yellow paper. He stuck it to the handle, and then took a step back. For a moment, nothing happened. Wukong hoped that he'll hear the clap of a clipper followed by the call of a director, ending the scene. Maybe it's an actor

or crew member who ordered noodles, and Wukong actually got the location right, and his multitasking skills hadn't failed him.

Except that wasn't what happened and the ground started shaking, the tremors making it all the way to the pipes Wukong was residing in. One of the pipes disconnected from the system —an inactive one going by the rust and dryness, and caused Wukong to nearly fall down into a very unwelcoming crowd of paper zombies. He gripped onto an upright pipe with his tail, holding the paper bag of what he hopes is dry and not broth noodles for dear life because if either of his limbs failed him now, he was going to wish he took his chances with Bajie earlier in the shop.

The ink on the paper lit up and summoned a ring of symbols Wukong couldn't understand around the staff. Instantly, the greenery around the staff died off and followed by the sound of the staff ripping from the ground. The staff hadn't fully pulled off yet when from the mountain burst a hulking mass of a lion demon, one larger than Yellowtusk. The staff flew off in Wukong's direction, landing directly below him. The puppets scattered to avoid it and then immediately get on their knees and kowtow to the newest addition to the room.

Or the oldest, as Wukong was quickly coming to realize.

Azure Lion flexed his hands for a moment, expression being that of awe, before he turned to Yellowtusk and Peng. He smiled softly, fondly, gratefully. "Yellowtusk, Peng! It's so good to see you!" he yelled, voice raspy but light.

Peng laughed loudly, Yellowtusk breathed a sigh of relief.

"Welcome back, Azure!!" Peng caws. "Shall we pick up where you left off?"

Azure hummed, flexing his hands a few times before smiling. "Yes. Immediately."

Yellowtusk deflated in exasperation, like this was a conversation they had had a million times before and never ended the way he wanted it to. Regardless, he raised his arm towards the staff, the chinese character for *come*-- which made Wukong realize that the symbols from before were probably some kind of ancient hanyu-- manifesting in his palm, the same character writing itself on the paper still somehow attached to the staff.

A normal person would've turned tail and left, or panicked, Wukong wasn't sure. He wasn't a normal person, though.

"Should we do something about this?" he asked the bird, still peacefully perched on the pipe as if it wasn't at a steep incline, but leaning forward to watch the scene in interest.

The staff shook, vibrating not dissimilar to the way it did earlier, and that was when Wukong fell. Right between the staff and Yellowtusk. Because of course. He didn't know if his tail had failed him or if he'd let go on impulse, but either way, he was now currently in Big Trouble.

The three demons stared at him for a moment, as if puzzling out his presence. He can't blame them; he's just as confused as they are, but the stares are starting to unnerve him. He was

never one for eyes staring directly into his soul—seriously, why do people even do eye contact? It's creepy!!

Wukong laughed nervously, shakily presenting the paper bag to the three. "Uh, Bajie Mian?"

"Let's start with this one, shall we?" Peng proposed. Their wings were a lot more solid and sharp than they were a moment ago, Wukong realized.

Azure Lion sighed. "Don't bother with this one, Peng. It's not worth it."

"Aww, don't be such a killjoy, Azure—that's more Yellowtusk's thing."

Well, Yellowtusk isn't being a killjoy now*, was he?!* Wukong scrambled away as Peng *flew* at him at a speed that should've cut his neck off before he was even able to drop the bag, but somehow he was able to grab something—anything—to block the sword that was coming for his forehead.

"WHAT?!"

Wukong peeled open his eyes. Peng's beak was dangerously close to his nose and the curve of their blade is just barely cutting into Wukong's bonnet, but they're's not coming any closer, the blade stopped by whatever Wukong held in his hands. He looked down, only to be met with the sight of a violent scarlet—one he only saw in his sketchbook.

Peng backed off and brandished another blade, glaring at Wukong hard enough that it made Bajie's worst glare look fatherly by comparison. "WHAT?!"

"That's impossible!" Yellowtusk gasped but pulled up a massive hammer at the ready. "The staff should've been cut right through!"

Azure sighed, and it's less exhausted this time—angrier, more hateful. "It seems that heaven had set precautions. Be it the staff, or the bvoy-- There's no way the Harbinger would've done this. Very well, if that's how they wish to play it." He stood tall, taller than he ever had the whole time Wukong had known him. It made his previous stance look friendly. "Let our first returning feat as the Brotherhood be that of sending heaven a little message."

Wukong gulped, gripping the staff tighter. He should let go. He's above begging for his life, but he should let go. This wasn't any of his business. "I don't suppose that it's going to be an email?"

They didn't even humor him. "Serve the simian as the filling for tonight's dinner."

Emails were overrated anyway.

Peng crouched low, winding up for an attack. The hoards of puppets shuffled closer, their eyes glowing red underneath their talismans. Wukong experimentally spun the staff to get a

better grip on it. He was going to lose, but he could at least try, right?

Apparently he had no choice because the spin had extended the staff and promptly forced everyone into a dangerous and painful game of limbo. Wukong, being the one holding the staff, was the only one left standing at the end of it. Extremely dizzy, but the only one not hunched over in pain.

Wukong wasn't even able to fully take in the damage when he's pushed away from the site by the staff, like it had a mind of its own. He's shoved in the elevator while the staff planted itself through the bottom and extended, taking the elevator back to ground level at unsafe speeds.

"That staff–" Azure grunted, getting back on his feet.

"The talisman!" Yellowtusk gasped, quickly going through a thick sheaf of yellow paper. "Peng, he has the talisman!"

"*The* talisman?!" Peng screeched. "You've *got* to be kidding me!"

Wukong ran to his ragged tuktuk, held together by hopes and dreams and duct tape, stuffed the staff into the cup holder and drove away at full speed. He felt only slightly sorry for all the people that he heard screaming behind him because he quickly became one of them when he realized that Peng was on his tail. They're destroying everything in their path with winds that were far too magical to be allowed to exist in this world but are also causing too much damage to be practical effects.

"You will pay for your transgressions, simian!" Peng yelled.

"Can I pay you with free noodles? People aren't the same when they're hungry, you know!" Wukong offered, holding another bag of takeout.

Peng didn't grace him with a response, but Wukong threw that bag of noodles along with a few others to their face anyway, not that it did much more than mildly annoy an already furious creature Wukong wished to live in a different dimension from.

Wukong took a hard left onto an elevated highway that should take him straight to the other side of Megapolis, directly to Bajie's, to home, completely ignoring the numerous warning and *Do Not Pass* signs in his way. This was all just a hallucination. When he got home, Bajie would scold him, Macaque would tease him, Sanzang and Wujing would tell him stories, and everything would be alright.

Except of *course* it isn't because he's in a tuktuk going against a celestial being that was a nameless legend an hour ago and *what was he thinking OH GOD HE'S OUTSIDE THE WINDOW* .

Peng sliced the roof of the tuktuk off, just barely grazing Wukong's head and wound up for another swing, except Wukong took a sharp drop because he had run out of road. First of all:

betrayal. Second, he's *screwed.* Pancaked. Maybe he'd make the perfect mashed monkey to show the heavens like Azure Lion wanted.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!!" Wukong begged, shaking the staff in hopes that it'll do something, anything!! But it's just a staff. A staff that's going to get him killed because he may be falling, but Peng's coming at him at faster speeds.

"Ooh! A little birdie!"

Then, Wukong is caught in someone's arms and accidentally smacked Peng square in the gut with a very heavy magical staff. Wukong blinked as he's flown further and further away from Peng, currently deeply embedded on the side of a building.

Peng huffed, shaking off the rubble from their feathers. The simian disappeared behind a cluster of towers, carried away by a third party. No matter. Peng uncurled his first, and in his head was an unscathed talisman.

"Nice stick you've got there, Wukong!" Ao Lie whistled, helping Wukong onto a harness in a mechanical hang glider he just conveniently had. "New toy? Or is it a hobby? I can never tell with you."

"Ao Lie?" Wukong whispered, one hand on the bar of the hang glider, one hand on the staff, and his tail firmly wrapped around additional support Ao Lie had installed in the back. "That. Was. AWESOME!!"

"Aww? You really think so?"

"Uh, yeah?! Are you kidding me?? I thought I was a goner back there!"

"Hm? Why? Because of a bird?" Ao Lie asked as he landed the hang glider in front of Bajie's shop.

"Well, kinda? They *were* trying to kill me."

"Awww, really?" Ao Lie coos as he guides Wukong out of the harness. "That's unfortunate. It was a really cute bird." Behind him, the hang glider jerked around and spanned into a small backpack. "Anyway, where did you find its nest~?" The tone was sweet, but the look in his eyes was not.

"WUKONG!"

Both Wukong and Ao Lie flinched at the call, turning to the shop and seeing a fuming Bajie stomping towards them.

“I’ve been getting calls left and right of customers asking for their orders! Care to explain *why* ?!”

“Bajie!” Wukong wailed, “You won’t believe what just happened!”

“Oh, really? Let me guess. That silly hero from Sanzang’s stories came down and asked you to be his sidekick, eh?”

Wukong blinked for a moment before laughing nervously. “ *What* ? Nothing like that!”

“It was awesome, ge!” Ao Lie cut in, throwing his fists into the air in his excitement. “There was this birdie that was racing Wukong and it was *sooo* fast!!”

“A *bird* ?!” Bajie scoffed. He turned to Wukong, ready to chew him out for letting something as little as a puff of feathers get in the way of his job, only to find the space distinctly lacking of a hyperactive monkey. He whipped around and caught Wukong’s tail as he disappeared into the shop. “HEY! GET BACK HERE!”

“Mr. Sanzang!!” Wukong called, bursting into the shop. From the counter, Sanzang and Wujing stopped their conversation to turn to Wukong. “The- the- the story you were telling me like, an hour ago--?!” He dove behind the counter, rummaging through the shelves and cupboards, throwing various items with little care in the world—specifically his death in the form of a 4’8” pig being held back by the collar by a scrawny mechanic who also has one hand on his phone, as if Bajie was just a grumpy cat and not at all an unhappy chef.

Sanzang glanced back at Wujing, but the demon just shrugged, ever a man a few words, his elbow knocking over a bottle of soy sauce. Sanzang absentmindedly caught it and turned his attention back to the shuffling monkey. “…yeah? What about it, Wukong?”

“*Where, where, where???!*” Wukong murmured frantically, running his hands through his mane.

“Looking for this?”

Wukong whipped his head to the doorway between the kitchen and the restaurant main. Macaque was there, holding a scuffed hardbound pleather book maintained a whole lot better than Wukong’s tuktuk (which was probably laying in scraps at the bottom of the highway somewhere).

“YES!” Wukong cheered, snatching the book out of Macaque’s hands and leafing through the pages.

Macaque rolled his eyes. “Stop leaving it by the sink and maybe you’ll stop losing it.”

Wukong scoffed, “I don’t *lose* it. I know *exactly* where I put it—you just keep taking it!!”

“Well, *duh* , it gets in the way of my work. We have cubbies for a *reason* , Wukong.”

“AHA! HERE!” Wukong slammed the book harder than he should’ve onto the counter. The spread was that of his visual creative interpretation of the Harbinger’s last story. The paint was patchy and went out of the bounds of his pencil sketch in some places, but the story it was telling was still clear. “This one? It’s real!! And- and the Azure Lion is free and he’s going to destroy us all and—“

Wujing let out a soft laugh, contrasting Sanzang’s poorly concealed annoyed and disappointed expression. “Don't be ridiculous; it’s just a story, Wukong,” Wujing chided softly, patting Wukong’s thick mane. “There’s no way it can be real.”

“But- but it *was* ! Look, I- I even have the Harbinger’s staff!” Wukong pulled out the stick, shining in its full metal glory and hefty in his hand, but he carried it like it had nothing more than the weight of a non-magical wooden one nonetheless.

“Cute,” Macaque drawled, unimpressed.

Wukong’s brow twitched, clacking like the magazine of a firearm, before he promptly tried to hit his brother square on the head with the closest available thing. Said available thing so happened to be an ancient staff that for a moment he forgot had pole vaulted him from the bottom of the city to the top in a few seconds. Macaque dodges, thankfully, but as soon as the staff is parallel to the floor, it shoots out and punches a sizable hole through the wall of the thick, solid concrete wall of the shop.

There’s a moment of silence as the staff slowly retracted its way back to Wukong.

Wujing hollered in excitement, shooting up and knocking over the stool he was sitting in. His leg got caught in the lower bar and sent him tumbling down onto the floor with the chair. Sanzang’s jaw dropped to the floor in horrified shock. Bajie blinked at the new hole in the wall in a daze as Ao Lie scampered out the shop to happily poke his head through the hole with little resistance, even having space to push a selfie stick through and take a photo. Macaque was hiding in the rafters from where he’d jumped up in shock, and Wukong would be there too if he hadn’t been holding onto the staff with both hands for dear life.

“There's no way that just happened,” Sanzang murmured.

“Wait,” Wujing paused, the noise in the shop cutting to zero now that no one else is making any noise. “If the staff’s here, then where’s Azure Lion?”

“Oh, the city just issued an evacuation warning because he’s currently starting to jumpstart some sort of ritual in the square,” Ao Lie answered, completely nonchalantly from where he is now lounging on the counter.

“...he’s **WHAT**?!”

=O=

“All these years, and still, humans are no match for us,” Azure hummed, watching as sparks bounced off the magical barrier Yellowtusk had set up. “I must say, I’m impressed that they’re able to throw pebbles at such speeds.”

Yellowtusk hummed in reply, but no concentration was taken away from the array he’s drawing on the ground. Peng humphed in amusement, choosing not to mention the way Azure’s pupils blew wide at the pebbles that bounced off the barrier like a cat drawn to a toy. Peng could mess with their brother at another time.

“Whether or not they can actually hurt us doesn’t matter, Azure,” Peng said. “The array Yellowtusk is preparing will absorb anything the world can throw at us!”

“It’s not just that,” Yellowtusk corrected, “It’ll also absorb the latent energies around us, including anything heaven has available. You’ll be able to withstand even the Jade Emperor at the end of this.”

The array was complete. With the talisman Peng had retrieved from the simian in place, the ritual was ready.

“How long do you suppose this’ll take?” Azure asked.

“Given the fact that your body is still unstable from five hundred years of inactivity?” Yellowtusk snarked, a brow raised. “A while.”

“Hm.”

“Worried about the simian, brother?” Peng joked.

“How can I not be? He was able to defeat us with a single swing. There’s no doubt he’s reporting back to heaven right now.”

“Alright, then, if that’s your problem, then I can take care of him for you. I’ve defeated him once, I can do it again!”

“You don’t even know where he is. He could be all the way at the Jade Court right now,” Azure argued.

“Do you really doubt us now, Azure?” Peng mocked, sharing a look with Yellowtusk, who was already drawing a smaller array– one Azure recognized as a tracking array.

“I know where he is.”

=O=

It was Wujing's idea to drive to the docks, for the lack of any better ideas.

The beginning of the evacuation was calm, albeit a little nerve wracking given the fact that Wukong was holding onto the actual Harbinger's staff. There were a lot of people and vehicles, but it wasn't anything they couldn't handle.

And then the sky started changing.

Even in the deep night, the sky never turned into a vibrant, sapphire blue such as this. It was as beautiful as it was unsettling, but even that wasn't *too* weird. Until golden hairline fractures scattered across the sky, and that's when it hit them all that this was real, and they could very much die.

"Okay, so, Five Phases Mountain–" Wujing asked in pauses, hands gripping the wheel tight enough to be a cause for concern. Then again, so was the cracking sky above them. " *Where* would we even find that? Until an hour ago, we thought that this whole thing was just a legend!"

"Perhaps if we just keep going east, we'd find it?" Sanzang suggested unhelpfully from the passenger's seat, holding an anxious pair of monkeys on his lap.

In the back of the food truck, Ao Lie was holding onto the front seats for dear life while Bajie curled in the corner, speaking hushed tones into his phone. "*Don't worry sweetie, this'll all be over soon, stay safe, okay? Love you."*

"It'll be a fun adventure!" Ao Lie suggested, toppling over after as Wujing took a sharp turn.

"To where?!" Macaque asked, near hysterical, the lower half of the staff tight in his hands from the lack of things to hold on to. Beside him, Wukong winced as Macaque's tail wound tighter around his waist.

"East! We can try east!" Ao Lie suggested, for real this time, clamoring back to his feet. "If we follow the road along the docks, there'll be a mountain range with five peaks we can probably drive through with this *huge* mountain. Mr. Sanzang and Wujing pass by it sometimes on their hikes."

" *That* mountain?" Wujing asked incredulously, but hit the pedal nonetheless and causing Macaque to further tighten his hold. Wukong chirped in pain, but said nothing. "It's too steep. It's a high climb– it's too dangerous even *with* climbing gear."

"But it's our best bet," Sanzang replied, running a soothing hand up and down Macaque's clothed arm and keeping a hand on Wukong's scalp. " *If* it's real."

"Really?!" Bajie yelled, popping up beside Ao Lie in the back. "Sanzang, the sky is *literally* falling apart, and you *still* think this isn't real??"

"But what if it's not? What if the Harbinger isn't real??"

“ENOUGH!” Wukong yelled, just as high strung as his brother, hands trembling against the staff. “What other choice do we have?” This was never supposed to happen. This was the stuff of fairytales; when he said he loved legends, he didn’t mean *this* .

The drive was silent the rest of the way.

When they made it to the hiking trail, Wukong’s first thought was ‘ *Oh, this’ll be easy.’* And then he actually tried to go up and started doubting his simian ancestry.

“WHY IS THIS SO HARD?” Wukong screamed into the wilderness. Back at the city, the sapphire, gold cracked sky rumbled as if in reply. “Oh,” he chuckled nervously, “right. Going. I’m going.”

Wukong reached up to the next ledge, only for it to crumble under his fingers. The lack of handhold sent Wukong into a frenzy and caused him to slip off, but as he passed a black mass on the way down, his wrist was grabbed by a tail.

“Wukong!” Macaque hissed, “Careful!”

Wukong took a second to look down– take in how far he was actually able to climb. How long ago had the adults tapped out when it got too difficult for them to continue? First it was Bajie– too scared of the prospect of falling, then Wujing– when the climb became too dangerous for his careless nature, then a while later, Sanzang– when his weak physical abilities caught up to him. Wukong had come a long way, but when he turned his head up to thank Macaque, he saw that there was a lot more mountain to go.

“You alright, Wukong?” Ao Lie asked.

“I-I’m fine.” He had to be. Macaque’s tail was shaking, but Wukong knows it’s not from strain. His brother was stronger than that.

Macaque guided Wukong back to the mountainside, and Wukong quickly worked his way back up.

Then, below him– “WUKONG– THE BIRDIE!”

Wukong snapped his body to the side just in time to see the avian demon– Peng– swoop in in a beeline towards him. Then, they pummel from a sudden weight at their feet.

“Don’t– you– DARE touch him!”

“Macaque!!” Ao Lie called. He jumped without hesitation, and it left Wukong on the mountainside as Ao Lie deployed his glider and tried to take a swing at Peng, who dodged with a lot more grace than Ao Lie’s mechanical creation.

Peng bent down, sword at the ready, but Macaque let go just in time, before the blade sliced his face off. Ao Lie was ready and caught Macaque in his arms, then rose up with the aid of the thrusters on his gilder to try to take another swing at Peng.

Wukong supposed that he was naive to think that they could do anything against an immortal.

All it took was one kick for Ao Lie to go down, taking Macaque with him. Wukong couldn't see them from here, but he could hear the combined panicked screams of his friends.

"Cumbersome pests," Peng muttered, then turns to Wukong. "I'll be taking that staff now. "

Below, Macaque and Ao Lie watch as Peng ripped the staff away from Wukong's back as he slammed him into the peak above.

Ao Lie didn't think he's going to forget the cry Macaque let out any time soon.

=O=

They landed into the trees with a bit of a quiet crash, if Ao Lie is going to be honest. Maybe it was the shock talking. The mountain had *quaked* with the force Wukong had been thrown into it. There's no way he could've survived that, could he? No, now's not the time for fairy tales, not when they were coming to life left and right.

"Xiao Lie! Macaque!" Sanzang's voice was muffled, Macaque's claws against his chest were distant. Something wet is seeping into his shoulder from where Macaque's head was, but Ao Lie just barely registered the warmth. "Are you okay?"

"Where's Wukong?" Wujing asked. Ao Lie didn't respond to that either.

Someone was trying to take Macaque away from Ao Lie. No. He can't let that happen. They already lost Wukong– he can't.

"Macaque, Mihou, are you alright?" Ah, it's Bajie. Ao Lie relaxed his hold, but it still took a lot for Bajie and the others to uncurl his hands from Macaque's poncho.

"You're bleeding!" Sanzang gasps, hastily using the long sleeves of his jacket to wipe as much blood away from Macaque's face as possible.

Wujing gently moved the scholar out of the way and placed a cloud print band aid across Macaque's brow, then wiped away the tears and remaining blood from his face. It barely covered anything, the band aid quickly being soaked, so Wujing put another one. "Are you okay, Mihou?"

"Wukong– *Ge* — he– he–"

Ao Lie slowly shuffled to get up. Everything was aching. Something poked into his side and he realized that it's the frame of his glider. He numbly shrugged it off and reflexively

surveyed the damage. It's nothing irreparable– in fact Wukong would be able to fix it on his own.

Wukong…

"What are we going to do?" Ao Lie asked, softly, as if any louder and the gods would hear and answer the question for them.

"Where's Wukong?" Bajie asked, gently shaking Macaque, but the monkey only continued to babble inaudible nonsense.

Ao Lie shivered at the thought, but soldiers through. "He's–"

"NO HE'S NOT!" Macaque yelled.

"Mihou–"

"NO, THERE'S NO WAY HE'S DEAD! THAT IDIOT'S STRONGER THAN THAT!!"

"He was thrown into the mountain, Mihou! What do you want me to say?!"

"HE'S SUN WUKONG."

"HE'S *MORTAL,* MACAQUE!" Ao Lie screamed, tears running down his face. "WE ALL ARE! This isn't some story or– or legend. Even if it was, we're not gods or anything!"

It's quiet, for a moment.

In the distance, the sky rumbled.

"It's not over yet, though," Wujing mumbled. Then, louder: "No, it's not over yet. We came this far because we wanted a chance at saving the world."

"Wujing–" Sanzang swallowed. "Wujing's right. We have even less than we did before, but… but we should still try to stop Azure Lion– for the people."

"I think that the phrase you're looking for," Wujing sighed, getting on his feet, "--is they are going to **pay.**"

Macaque continued to sob silently throughout it all.

=O=

People were always calling Wukong stubborn as a rock. He never once thought that it was literal, even in his childhood.

Except he was just rammed into a mountain and he's *alive* somehow.

Everything hurt, but it is more akin to an ache than the sharp pain that fiction claimed broken bones to be. He hadn't opened his eyes yet, but he could feel the ground spinning beneath him. Why was the ground still spinning? Was he in lava? No, the wet he's in was too cold to be lava. Speaking of, "wet"? Was it his blood? No… that's not fun… Mihou never liked blood. He was always squeamish around it, always immediately disappearing from the immediate area whenever Bajie or Wukong cut themselves while preparing food. Even something as small as a papercut was enough to send him running… wait, no– get your thoughts straight, Wukong! It's Mr. Sanzang who's squeamish around blood! Mihou had to patch one too many of Wukong's injuries to be able to afford being uncomfortable around it.

But what about Mihou? What would his brother do if Wukong disappeared here, in the heart of a mountain in the middle of nowhere? Heaven forbid he tried taking up any form of customer service ever again– if not his aversion to people, then his defensive front would drive Bajie out of business! Ha, he's lucky that he has Wukong by him all the time– he'll protect Mihou! There'll be nothing to be afraid of.

Wukong just has to get up and get back to that.

"Huh? Oh, you're awake!"

Wukong had yet to comprehend what he is seeing when something–someone popped to his left, hovering over him like a curious monkey. Wukong would know; Mihou was an ever persistent curious monkey at one point– something he picked up from Wukong. In fact, he picked up a lot of things from Wukong, hadn't he?

"Wakey wakey, buddy! Got things to do!" the person whispered, gently shaking Wukong for a moment before a little bit of cold water splashed onto his face.

Wukong spluttered in surprise and got up– splashing more water everywhere, but his little outburst is only witnessed between him and…. Was that the Harbinger?

"Hey there, buddy!" the Harbinger greeted– and oh boy, it *was* the harbinger, just as the stories said! Long, black hair like a freshly wetted ink stick spilling over pale, aged parchment-colored skin– the lifelessness of his appearance greatly contrasted by the warm hazel of his eyes and the oranges of his robes. "Up and at it already? Wow, you must be stronger than I thought!"

"You!" Wukong yells, jumping to his feet, pointing an accusatory finger at the Harbinger. "I've been looking for you!"

"Uh…Well, you've found me," Harbinger replied, rubbing the back of his neck, sitting crossed legged in a shallow pool of water. They were in a cave, but sunlight shone from both in front and behind them. "Do you need something?"

"YES!" Wukong yelled, grabbing the Harbinger by the lapels. He rambled about the story, Azure Lion, about Peng and the staff and that staff's gone but that's not important, because the Harbinger is here and he's the only who can defeat–

“Hey, hey, hold on there, pal,” the Harbinger chuckled, grounding Wukong with his hands on his shoulders. “I get it, I get it. You wanna get rid of Azure, right?”

“Well–YEAH! That’s why I’m here!”

The Harbinger hummed and pursed his lips, looking to the side. Then, he got up, water flowing down his robes like a waterfall, the dyes of his ancient robes dripping into the pool before disappearing, like water soluble ink. The Harbinger walked towards the other end of the cave, leaving the hole Wukong must’ve been slammed into behind them. Wukong followed after him without a second thought.

As they walked, Wukong took in the smooth walls of the cave– devoid of cracks and grooves that would normally be found on rock. Instead, there were thousands and thousands of paintings, lit up by the lack of ceiling above, the sun shining down on them as if it was a spotlight. The vines and leaves above provide just enough shade to keep them cool while still letting enough light through to make it look like an art gallery. Each painting was immaculate– either in its detail or its simplicity. Wukong himself liked to draw from life, but seeing the incredibly stylized landscapes and portraits of the Harbinger made him want to reconsider his own art style.

“Wanna know a little secret?” the Harbinger asked, whispering as if there was anyone there who could hear them. His voice echoed throughout the hall, and yet it’s only Wukong who could understand him.

Wukong nodded, never one to pass up a good story.

“I already knew that Azure was free. In fact, I was right there with you.”

“HUH?!”

The Harbinger laughed, shoulders shaking from his giggles. “You should see the look on your face!” he teased, pulling Wukong’s cheek like an old lady. “To be honest, I’d be a pretty terrible warden if I didn’t know what was happening around my own prisoner.”

“But– but he’s free, what are you going to do about it?” Wukong asked, rubbing his cheek.

“Me? Pft, why *me?* ”

“Because–”

“Don’t try to be slick, buddy. You’ve survived the Golden-Winged Peng. He’s not just some demon you can beat with some ordinary stick and call it a day,” the Harbinger said, continuing his walk, except this time there’s clouds forming under his feet like stairs. Wukong tried to follow after, but the cotton disintegrated into wisps under his weight. “and that’s another thing–!” the Harbinger called from above, well above Wukong’s head but thankfully no longer rising, his strides longer and more akin to skates than steps and leaving Wukong to run after him. “You were able to bring the staff all the way up here–right until Peng, you know, took it, but I’ll cut you some slack since it’s your first day.”

“First day?” Wukong panted. “First day of what?”

“Of being–” The Harbinger jumped from his place above, flipping forward and landing in a perfect crouch in front of Wukong. “--my *successor* !” he finishes, hands on his hips.

Wukong stared at the Harbinger like he’d grown an extra head– perhaps one that would pop up and say ‘ *sike!* ’ before going on to take care of Azure. “Is.. this a joke?”

“A joke?” the Harbinger snorted, then leaned forward, his mouth next to Wukong’s ear. “More like a secret.

“Not for long, though.”

=O=

He didn’t like it when people called him Mihou. That was for friends and family only, but when customers came to the shop, the human ones especially, would often call him according to what Sanzang called him like he was some *pet* . He *hated* it, so he asked everyone to call him Macaque. Bajie had taken to delivery services to reduce the amount of pick up delivery guys who came in, Wujing would make sure that he was always blocking the kitchen door from the rest of the restaurant from where he sat, Ao Lie made sure to make it clear that "Mihou" was not for anyone else but family, and Sanzang had taken to not calling Mihou out of the kitchen at all. They all had their ways of protecting him, but he had to admit that Wukong skipping the threats and just fighting customers was the funniest. It was also the one that got him into the most trouble, but given that Bajie was always a breath away from launching the mop through any person who dared, he supposed it was more for the principle of it.

Out here, however, there were no customers to call him by his name like he was just an animal. Out here, there was no one to stare at him for longer than necessary.

Out here, there was no Wukong who would protect him anyway.

Mihou knew that. Wukong could take a lot of hits, but there was no way he’d survived *that* . The throw had been felt all the way down to where everyone else had been waiting. Mihou wasn’t delusional.

Or at least, he hoped he wasn’t.

Because right now, he is fixing Lie-ge’s glider, forcing the frame back into shape and rescrewing nuts that had fallen out in the crash. The others hadn’t wanted to leave him here, but he appreciated that they did. Mihou isn’t a lot of things, and a hero isn’t one of the few things he is. *Saving the world?* Pft, really, now? What would Mihou even do in that situation? Scold Azure Lion into death? Nagging was the only thing he was good at anyway…

“ *Mihou!* ”

If the frame hadn't been metal, it would've crumbled underneath Mihou's fists out of surprise.

"Mihou! There you are!"

Mihou whipped around, seeing Wukong– his brother who was supposed to be *dead* , stumble out of the foliage like he had just gotten a bit lost during a camping trip instead of being a smear on a mountain. Mihou let himself have a moment of doubt, a moment to consider that this might be a trick, a hallucination, something fictional, before giving into base instincts and tackling Wukong in a hug.

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!" he yelled into Wukong's mane, fluffy and smelling strongly like the inks and old papers of Sanzang's study, but underneath it all was the scent of spices at Bajie's restaurant and the peaches his brother was downright addicted to.

Wukong laughed, patting Mihou's back. "Up! Turns out there was a mountain path just off to the side. There's lots of stairs but it has a slide– how cool is that? We should hang out there sometime!"

Mihou wheezed a laugh into Wukong's hair and held him tighter, tail snugly coiling around Wukong's waist. Only Wukong…

"Where are the others?" Wukong asked.

"Out. Back in the city."

"What?! Why?"

"They're going to fight Azure."

"Then we need to get going!" Wukong stubbornly wiggled out of Mihou's grip. "Hey, look! You fixed Lie-ge's glider, right? We can use it!" he suggested happily, skipping over to said glider and reassembling it with much more difficulty than Mihou ever had with any of Ao Lie's mechanics.

"And then what? Azure is a *god* , Wukong! You lost against his lackey!" Macaque pleaded, scrambling shakily onto his feet.

"Well, that was before! I know a secret way that'll *definitely* get rid of him!"

"The Harbinger?"

"No!" Wukong replied confidently, turning to Mihou, eyes alight with an oh so familiar determination, a light that Mihou knew couldn't do everything, but one that makes him believe such a delusion nonetheless.

" *Me.* "

=O=

Ao Lie was familiar with the emotional whiplash that came with the Sun brothers. And for it, he's going to punt them into the next century because not only had Wukong come back from the dead, but Mihou had gone and *enabled it* .

Not that Wukong dying or coming back was Mihou's fault– in fact the poor guy seemed to be in as much of a shock as everyone else had been when the two had come tumbling out of the sky in Ao Lie's glider– but Ao Lie was 100% sure that there were more tactful ways to reannounce Wukong's presence.

"Run me through what's happening!" Wukong demanded, hands on his hips with a confidence that left no room for doubt.

"Um, Azure is taking over the world?" Wujing volunteered, before throwing a paper zombie into a hoard of them just beyond the horizon like a twisted game of bowling.

"Azure Lion is holding a ritual of sorts that's merging him with the universe so that he could take over," Sanzang supplied, yelping and ducking down as Bajie javelins a mop over his head and skewers a good number of recovering zombies.

"He's using the staff as a battery of sorts," Bajie added, pulling out a fresh mop from who knows where.

"We tried to stop him, but he was able to push us back and now we're here," Ao Lie concluded, pointing a welding torch in the direction of another hoard and promptly setting the paper puppets in flames and starting an undead mini forest fire.

"WOW, you guys are *good* at this! I can't believe you actually got close enough to learn all that. Maybe we should become superheroes!"

"Wukong," Bajie started, "if you're not going to be any help, I swear--!"

"Alright, guys, don't worry, I've got this!" Wukong said, taking the glider and shooting off to the ritual site.

"Wha– SUN WUKONG, GET BACK HERE!!" Bajie yelled. Mihou, meanwhile, cleared a place to sit on the confetti covered ground and made himself comfortable among all the chaos. "Oh *no* , you don't!" Bajie growled, picking up Mihou by the back of his collar like a cat and carrying him to the truck. "We're going after your brother!"

Azure was already an intimidating enemy when he still could've fit through the door of the noodle shop like a slightly larger customer. Except that apparently wasn't enough for him because now the worst the noodle shop could probably do to him was stub his toe, and even

that would be nothing more than a mild inconvenience in the grand scheme of things. Mihou saw the damn avian perched on a lightning rod of one of the lower buildings. They had their eyes set on Bajie's food truck, swords unsheathed and ominously glinting in the golden flashes, their wings seemingly the only thing that could be sharper.

"It's that damn bird again!" Ao Lie growled.

"Bye bye, chicken!" Wujing hollered, launching a crossbow shot smack into the middle of the demon's forehead and knocking them off their perch.

"Crossbow?" Sanzang asked incredulously. "Why do you have that on you?!"

"Are you *really* asking Wujing that?" Bajie asked back. "The man is *literally* driving without hands right now!"

Up to this point, Azure hadn't really been doing anything. He was huge, yes, and the sky was still cracking, but he hadn't really done anything other than breathe deeply. The current culprit of the whole situation was an elephant demon surrounded by talismans, the staff wrapped with them and trying to break free.

Unfortunately, by the time Mihou had assessed the situation, Wukong had already gone and changed it. He had dove headfirst into the ritual circle and grabbed the staff, disrupting whatever was happening and waking up Azure from what must've been meditation.

"YOU!" Azure's voice was booming, shaking the ground like a tangible thunder.

"Haha, me!" Mihou had just barely heard Wukong reply. "You're going *down* , Azure Lion!"

Except.

Of course Wukong hadn't expected for the elephant to move first. Mihou hadn't either, but he could beat himself up for that later.

The demon had thrown a talisman at Wukong. Mihou didn't see what happened, but he heard Wukong's scream. First of surprise, then of pain, then the sound of a metal staff hitting broken concrete with a dull *thunk* .

Wukong was gone again .

Or at least, Mihou thought he was. Not even a moment later, there's a bright flash of light, and there, floating at Azure's eye level, was Wukong, glowing an eerie teal that didn't suit him at all, but was soon overruled by the confident smirk he wore.

Mihou didn't like the Harbinger of Chaos already, he decided. Wukong had only known him to be real for a few hours and he's already died twice. *Twice.* Mihou didn't even have time to *grieve* the second time before Wukong came back kicking.

His brother was amazing like that, but *Mihou needed a break.*

Wukong had meant to bury Azure under a skyscraper out of pure adrenaline. It was *so cool!* He was flying, he was using the staff like it was second nature, he was *fighting a legend* . How could he *not* be excited?!

He got too excited, apparently, because Azure is easily able to grab hold of the building and put *Wukong* under it.

“How unfortunate,” Azure said, his voice shaking the building Wukong was buried under. “You were bestowed with your role prematurely. I pity you– this is not your fight, but it’s too late for you to back out now. Five hundred years ago, I was defeated by the Harbinger of Chaos, and yet, with my return, all I have is *you* .

“Any wishes you may have had about becoming the next Scribe of Fate will never be fulfilled, buried away with your body.”

“Oh, *that’s* rich,” Wukong snarked, forcing the staff in his hand to stand vertically, breaking the entire top of the rubble in half. “Did you want to fight the Harbinger? Boo~ hoo. Wanna take a vacation from fool’s paradise, kitty? You’re going against **the Monkey King!**”

There was a long list of things that the Harbinger could do, from repairing things with his blood to rewriting fate with his soul. He could shapeshift, bend space, create elemental monsters and projections out of nothing, and come back from the dead. Never in their stories, however, had the Harbinger ever physically become the monster he was made out to be. That was because the Harbinger was human, one reborn from the inks of Diyu’s scrolls, but a human nonetheless. Wukong, as far as the world’s concerned, was a demon, as if they were going to keep calling him that, then it only made sense that he was at his strongest when he was *actually* something to be feared.

The fight didn't last, after that. Wukong wasn’t entirely sure what he was on during that brief moment of rage, but whatever it was worked because next thing he knew, Azure was pinned under a single hand, back to his normal size. Wukong towered over him, using an enlarged staff for balance as if he wasn’t putting all of his large weight onto Azure, who was wheezing below him.

He could’ve killed him there, he supposed, but Mihou had called out to him, a little raisin in the aftermath of battle. Wukong couldn’t hear what he was saying, so he shrunk down to normal size, taking the staff with him and jogging over to Mihou.

“Yea?” Wukong asked innocently.

“....You… okay?” Mihou asked hesitantly.

“Um, yeah??? Actually, I'm doing better than ever! Did you *see* all that, xiaodi? DID YOU?”

“Uhh… yeah, kinda hard to miss.”

“Was I cool?”

“Really cool.”

“The coolest?”

“THE coolest!” Ao Lie suddenly cheered, joining in on the monkeys’ conversation, throwing his arms around both their shoulders. “By the way, they’re getting away,” Ao Lie added casually, pointing at the trio of demons in another array.

Wukong tried to shake off Ao Lie to finish off Azure, but Sanzang came in, then, winded and missing an earring, but here before any other adult and holding onto Wukong’s arm. “Don’t. That’s enough, Wukong.”

Wukong wasn’t sure how to interpret the worried sheen in Sanzang’s eyes, but he shrugged it off and watched as the Yellowtusk completed the array and disappeared.

“So!” Bajie called, exhausted, “Monkey King, huh?”

“I like it!” Wujing commented. “Rolls right off the tongue. Definitely easier to say than "Harbinger of Chaos.””

“Seriously, though, Wukong? *Monkey King* ?” Mihou sighs, annoyed, “What are you, seven?”

“C’mon, Mac! You gotta admit that it sounds *awesome!* ” Wukong laughed, leaning into his brother.

“Really awesome!” Ao Lie repeated, embracing Wukong fully, leaning down to whisper, “I *will* have your neck for all the white hairs you made me grow today, Wukong. Just you wait.” Ao Lie pulled away, his signature smile back on. Wukong was scared.

“Can we go home, maybe?” Mihou asked, starting to list to the side. Bajie bent down and cradled him in his arms, like he used to when they were kids.

“Yeah,” Bajie chuckled. “Let’s do that.”

(“...Hey, you were planning to rebrand anyway, right, ge?” Ao Lie asked jokingly, a consoling hand on his friend’s back as they stared at the rubble where Bajie Mian used to be.)

Chapter 2: King's Crown

Chapter Summary

> “Alright, then,” the Harbinger sighed, then tucked away both items. “It’s for a last resort, though. I’m sure whatever you friend’s doing can’t be that bad, right?”
>
> It was that bad.
>
> “....You know, I was really hoping that your friend would be on the defensive,” the Harbinger murmured.

Chapter Notes

> //slides into frame
>
> First of all, I would like to thank everyone who gave this fic the time of day. I can't reply to every comment, but I appreciate ALL OF THEM. I'd address them all individually, but I'm constantly running on fumes and anything less than an equally long appreciative paragraph wouldn't do y'all justice. I really appreciate the support, and hope all enjoy your time here.
>
> It's been a few months since I finished writing this, so I don't quite remember my writing process, but I've definitely missed quite a few times where I used "he" for Peng instead of "they". Take that as you will.
>
> I forgot to do this last chapter, but I actually have a tumblr you can hit me up at! My main is cursedhue.tumblr.com, where you can ask questions and I'll answer to varying degrees of honesty, and my side is seaweedcolored.tumblr.com, where you can find all the art I made under the #painted by stone au tag, along with other people's art of this au. The main artist of this AU is actually Virgil (virgilisspidey.tumblr.com), and I might not be able to reblog everything they draw because it's been lost to the mess known as their blog (not that I can say much considering the state of my main), BUT!! go check them out. Their art is VERY GOOD (also memey hehe).
>
> Also also I have comparison sheets between my design and Virgil's designs (that I'll post onto here eventually). How you visualize the characters is up to you, but Virgil is consistently great at character design, so go check them out.

"*Why didn't you start with that earlier?" Azure asked, eyeing the talisman with what must've been the name of the simian written on it.*

Yellowtusk breathed an exhausted sigh. "Combat is not my strong suit, brother." Yellowtusk took a step forward, intending to retrieve the staff and continue the ritual, but then the red ink of the talisman glowed an unnatural teal. "What–"

"*It's the Scripture!"*

The ink bled through the paper, super saturating it with ink, before it folded in on itself like origami. The talisman melted something slimy, something distinctly that of the Scripture of Fate himself before it flew into the air and from it, reborn, was a golden monkey.

"The Scripture of Fate is immortal," Yellowtusk murmured, going through his scrolls another time. "He can control death; not even the Jade Emperor can stop him. The fate of the world is always vulnerable to his every whim; Why would he need a successor? That simian couldn't have been anything else!"

Atop his throne- the same one from a story long past, carefully maintained by his brothers, Azure growled in response. "Five hundred years underground, only to be shown up by a demon not even a century old... How far I've fallen..."

Peng popped up from behind the throne, claws digging into the smooth stone as he perched above Azure's head. "How far you've fallen indeed! What happened to you, Azure? Did half a thousand years under a mountain crush your spirit? Preposterous!" Peng scoffed. They used the backrest as a launchpad and leapt into the air, landing at the bottom of the steps that led up to their platform- a wide, elevated space big enough for Azure's grand throne, Yellowtusk's large desk, and Peng's own gaudy swing. "Don't be discouraged, brothers. I will take care of our little... setback."

"Then I will go with you-" Azure started, getting up.

"No," Yellowtusk said sternly, a talisman sticking itself to Azure's chest and making him sit back down. "You are still weak. You were already too unstable for the array, yet you still followed through with it! You are not going anywhere until I give you the clear, do you understand?!"

"But Peng-"

"Don't work yourself into a worry, Azure. I can handle myself just fine," Peng assured, turning away and talking towards the exit. "I'll be sure to bring you something you'll like. The Harbinger's head, perhaps?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Yellowtusk glared.

Peng clicked their tongue in annoyance. "Very well, just the staff, then. Honestly, you'd think something so powerful would be harder to steal. I'm sure I'll be able to take it from right under that simian's nose all over again.

"It's just a heavy stick, after all."

=O=

"...Yep, that's a scar." Bajie asked, leaning over to get a better view.

Wujing shrugged, silently agreeing but deeming it no big deal. He folded up the bandaid and threw it into the nearby bin.

Sanzang put a handheld mirror into Mihou's open palm. "Probably not that big a surprise," he commented. "It *was* a pretty deep cut."

Mihou brought up the mirror to his face, eyes immediately drawn to the small nick in his right eyebrow. The skin where Peng's blade had cut through was red and inflamed, but he knew that it would lighten with time, and if that didn't draw enough attention to it, then the clean cut straight through the hair of his brow would've. The wound wasn't fully healed yet, but the stitches Wujing had put on it were long gone.

In the background of his reflection, Wukong and Ao Lie were messing around in the yard outside.

Zhu Bajie was a simple and hardworking man with a wife and a noodle shop. Said noodle shop had just come crashing down when his brother-in-law went and picked a fight with a god. It was for the greater good, yes, but that didn't mean that Bajie was happy about it. The quaint noodle shop also doubled as Zhu Bajie's home that he shared with his wife and her two younger brothers. While the shop and attached apartment itself had already been rebuilt, the surrounding streets had not, so Zhu Bajie, his wife- Sun Ni, having kept her last name- and her two brothers- Sun Wukong and Sun Mihou- were staying in the Sun family home until then.

"And then I was like 'I'm the MONKEY KING!' And then boom! Kapow! AAAAAAAAHHHHH! AND BAM! There goes Azure Lion with his tail between his legs!" Wukong yelled, striking various poses with the iron staff like it weighed nothing. Mihou knew it weight a *lot*, having tried to carry it himself.

"YEAH! That kitty never even stood a chance!" Ao Lie cheered, ever the supportive big brother figure despite not understanding anything from Wukong's story.

"A-Lie, Wukong, we're leaving!" Sanzang called.

"Already? It's barely lunchtime!" Wukong replied.

"The shop ain't gonna fix itself!" Bajie yelled.

Wukong turned to Ao Lie, as if the mechanic was going to let pass any chance to get his hands greasy. Ao Lie just shrugged and dusted himself off on his way inside. Wukong huffed, following after.

"Can I get another bandaid, Wujing-dasheng?" Mihou asked timidly.

Wujing smiled and unwrapped another bandaid and pasted it over Mihou's new brow notch.

"Oooh, mangoes!" Wukong cooed, leaning over the backrest of the sofa and poking the print on the bandaid.

"Don't touch it!" Mihou hissed, batting Wukong's hand away and smacking his bonnet off in retaliation. His brother growled and shoved the orange head accessory into Mihou's face.

"What's the plan for today?" Ao Lie asked, on his phone again and completely ignoring the monkey business behind him (and Wujing tripping over the wastebasket on his way to sit).

"Painting, mostly," Sanzang replied. "The furniture won't be coming until the main roads are fixed."

"Won't the rain affect how the paint dries?"

"Rain?" Wukong and Mihou parroted in varying tones- one shocked and one hopeful.

"The weather station wouldn't allow for rain to fall over Megapolis now, would it?" Sanzang asked.

Ao Lie shrugged. "The weather station's compromised, apparently."

"Compromised? But the fight was nowhere near there!" Wukong commented.

"Oh, no, little birdie's just at his antics again."

"HUH?!"

=O=

"Don't tell the others," Peng whispered to the paper jiangshi stationed behind him, "but I'm actually impressed at some of the things mortals have done over the years. I mean, a machine that can control weather? *Without* magic? Ha! If only the dragon kings knew about this!"

Behind them, the elevator doors burst open, revealing a very cocky simian, his staff resting across his shoulders.

"Ah, if it isn't the simian!" Peng crowed, summoning his wings and swords. "It was only a matter of time before you showed up, I suppose."

"Um? Sorry, but last I checked, *you're* the chicken in this fight," Wukong snarked, cocking his head to the side.

"Yet I haven't run from a fight with you. I don't know how you survived our last encounter, but I'll be sure to stick around long enough to secure your trip to the land of the dead."

"Should... we have let him go alone?" Sanzang asked, eyes on the top of the weather station.

"It's Peng," Ao Lie said, nonchalantly going through his phone, "Wujing was able to headshot him with a crossbow. Wukong has the powers of the Harbinger now- the birdie will probably be dead before we know it."

"I suppose...but is manslaughter really necessary?"

"If it gets the job done, then sure," Bajie grumbled.

"...You shouldn't be encouraging this behavior, Bajie; Wukong is barely old enough to drive."

Bajie just shrugged.

Beside him, tucked underneath a black umbrella, Mihou tilted his cover out of his face to more clearly see the top of the building as well.

Bajie barely heard Mihou's gasp before the top of the weather station exploded in a mess of rubble.

"Look out!" Wujing called, yanking Bajie and Mihou out of the way of falling rubble.

"WUKONG?!" Sanzang called.

Everyone's eyes snapped back onto the sky. Sparks and shock waves burst across it in painfully loud sonic booms. No one could make out where Peng and Wukong were with the number of firework-like blasts.

"Is that supposed to happen?!" Bajie asked.

"I think we can assume that it's not!" Sanzang replied. Around them, buildings swayed dangerously and the road dented in some places in waves with each round of attack. "We need to leave, now!"

"What about Wukong?" Mihou asked.

"I'll stay here with him!" Wujing volunteered.

Bajie almost let him. Wukong can handle himself; he's seen first hand, but when he looked over to Mihou, who looked like he was ready to bolt towards his brother, he hesitated.

"No! I'm staying!" Bajie growled. "The only thing worse than staying here right now is letting Ao Lie drive."

"I can drive *just fine*, ge!" Ao Lie retorted over the sounds of panicking citizens spilling out the buildings.

"Just go! I'll take care of Wukong!"

The crowd threatened to turn into a stampede at any moment. The vehicles on the street came to a stop, but no one dared go out of their cars. If they stayed any longer, they would get swept up in the chaos. Wujing took initiative and hoisted Sanzang and Mihou onto his shoulders, Ao Lie scrambling onto his back on his own.

Mihou watched as Bajie stood in place for a moment, as if gathering his courage, and then disappeared into the crowd, almost like they were at the market instead of another city-wide threat.

If only they actually were at the market at the moment.

"I'll hand it to you, simian," Peng hissed, blades crossed and holding the staff between them, "for someone so young, you're quite the match."

"Should you *really* be giving the enemy compliments?" Wukong asked, raising his staff again and trying to hit Peng over the head with it like he did with Mihou when they were young, except Mihou never deflected his sticks with a knife.

"I'm just saying that this was fun while it lasted. Quite the warm up, if I do say so myself."

Peng flew into the sky, wings glinting in the cloudy weather and dove towards Wukong.

Throughout the fight, Wukong had been getting a hang of using the staff. Yeah, at first he was randomly extending and retracting it, but he's got the hang of it now, he thought. He aimed the staff downward, willing it to extend, and it did– at faster speeds than he'd intended, but he'd take it over the counterpart.

Below, thethe staff dug itself into the weather station, missing Bajie's stance by a hair at the ground floor.

"WUKONG!" Bajie cried, scrambling back several paces. "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!"

Oblivious, Wukong met Peng's dive head on, creating another dangerous crackle of energy across the sky.

"'Warm up?'" Wukong mocked, attempting to kick Peng in the face, but missing. "Okay, that's on me." He swung his tail and was able to deck Peng in the beak this time. "I am *so much* more than a warm up, *Peng*."

"Remember my name, simian, for it is the last thing you know," Peng threatened, spinning their blades. They extended their wings, becoming something larger than it was before.

Wukong perched on top of the staff, as if he wasn't unbelievably high above the ground. The staff swayed dangerously to the right, threatening to tip him off, so he forcibly swung it to the left. "Aw, then in that case, then you better know mine."

Wukong jumped forward, gripping the staff with his tail, and then his arms. Without retracting the staff, he forced it up, up, up, until its full length was in the air and rapidly diving towards Peng.

"Oh *please*," Peng groused, "*'Monkey King'?* Nothing but a child's pretend." As if to prove his point, the trajectory of the staff fell ever so slightly to the side, missing him entirely.

"DID WUKONG JUST LEVEL THE CITY?" Mihou screeched, watching in horror as the red staff rose from the ground like a circle's radius, destroying several blocks worth of buildings along the way, followed by a forceful slam into the opposite side. The crash of rubble was accompanied by the sight of several skyscrapers folding like chairs, gone in seconds.

"Did he?!" Sanzang yelled, equally horrified.

"I'm sure he's fine, though!" Ao Lie offered.

"That's the least of our problems right now!" Mihou retorted. The screams were louder, now, to the point where Mihou doesn't think he'll ever forget them. Last time, the city was quiet save for the cracks of the sky and the sounds of the various ways jiangshi puppets were being destroyed. No one else was hurt, everything was *fine*. But now? Now the city felt like something straight out of a movie, except everything was real, and honestly Mihou would like to go back home, please.

"Does Wukong know what he's doing?" Sanzang asked.

Ao Lie gulped, watching as the chaos crashed cars into each other and caused people to trample over one another. Wujing was far ahead of the worst of it, but there were people in balconies helping each other up, passing around children in hopes of sparing them from the worst of it before they went under the high pressure of several more people sprinting for their lives.

"The Harbinger," Mihou murmured, then louder, though there was a bitter note in his tone. "We need to get the Harbinger!" He had not seen the Harbinger personally, but their options were few. Any other time, he would've written Wukong's stories as imaginary, but the scene before them was far from it.

"Isn't Wukong his successor?" Sanzang asked. "If he's not stopping any of this, do you really think he would do it now?"

"Well, what else are we supposed to do?"

Sanzang grit his teeth. The Sun brothers had always been difficult, always taking gamble after gamble. While Mihou was right, that there was no other choice, he was also probably delusional in thinking that someone they hadn't even met was going to be their best bet. Sanzang wasn't even sure if what happened last time was real, and everything was falling apart again!

"I'll take him," Ao Lie volunteered, grabbing Mihou by the collar of his poncho. "You two stay safe, okay?"

"Don't worry about us, Xiao Lie!" Wujing chuckled. "There are…bigger things to worry about."

Sanzang flinched. As a doctor– albeit one for animals– Wujing probably felt responsible for all the suffering they were leaving behind them. Sanzang actively chose not to look back either, not when he had a good guess of what he'd see back there. Stampedes were rare in Megapolis, but it was still a big city with a lot of tight spaces and big events, so it wasn't a surprise when one happened every now and again.

Nothing of this scale, though. Nothing with this kind of panic.

Ao Lie looked like he wanted to give a farewell, maybe a 'see you soon,' but he deployed his glider and left with Mihou without another word.

=O=

"This is kind of our fault, isn't it?" Ao Lie mumbled into the wind.

"I don't know what you mean," Mihou replied, but his tone left no room for further conversation.

"Over there!" Mihou said, pointing at the cliff.

From up here, the surrounding forest looked hauntingly beautiful– overgrown foliage and dense trees that neither of them had time to appreciate the last time they were here. However, the green was dark– too dark for the time of day, almost like they were painted from too dark acrylics. It was ominous, unsettling. Ao Lie wondered why people liked camping or hiking in creepy woods like these.

The mountain itself, though, was a picture belonging to a museum.

As the glider circled the mountain, looking for the path Mihou said Wukong had mentioned, they gaped at the five peaks erected from the ground. The flora was slightly different for each mountain, Ao Lie recognized, almost like they were living in different seasons. The light was warmer on one end and cooler on the other, but one of the end peaks had the same dark foliage as the forest below, as well as a hole through the side of it. It starkly stood out against the rest of the cliffside– it wasn't large, but it was barren of flora, as if the greenery had disappeared when the hole had formed. Both Ao Lie and Mihou had a good idea of what caused the hole.

Mihou had Ao Lie land the glider there, unfortunately. There was a shallow pool of clear water, but no other signs of damage. It wasn't long since the instigating event, so Ao Lie didn't know how Wukong could've been unscathed by the throw, even if he had survived, in the end.

"Oh, hey! Visitors!" a voice called from the hall beyond. A moment later, a man popped up from the top of the mild incline, wearing long orange and teal robes stained with ink at the sleeves, his hair long and tied in something that resembled a braid but loose in too many places to make out where the locks were crossed anymore. He wore a bandana around his forehead, though its knot was lost underneath waves of black locks. His belt was decorated with a piece of jade shaped like half a yin yang, decorated by a long tassel. "Unless, of course, you're intruders, in which case, I'm not going to wipe your name off the scrolls of the dead for you."

"Uh, no," Ao Lie started, Mihou having instantly shuffled behind him with his umbrella opened and held over his head like a hood. "We're here about Wukong…?"

"Wukong? I don't know a Wu– OH! The little buddy? About yay high, came crashing through my wall the other day? Um, *was* it the other day? I swear it couldn't have been more than an hour ago."

"Uh- yeah, your successor?"

"OH! His name's Wukong? 'From nothing'? Sounds adorable. Buddy was in such a hurry, he didn't even tell me his name. What about him?" By then, the Harbinger had made his way down to the pool. The tip of his hair floating in the water like a brush. Ao Lie noticed how the color of his robes pooled around him in the pool like watercolors. He supposed that that was an indication of divinity, if anything at all.

"He's fighting the birdie right now–uh–"

"Peng," Mihou helpfully supplied.

"Right! Peng. That guy. *And* they're kind of destroying the city while they're doing it? Maybe you– I *dunno*– have something that can help with that?"

"'Leveling the city?' I'm sorry, *what*?" The Harbinger moved Ao Lie and Mihou out of the way, standing at the edge of the hole, looking at the city in the sizable distance– a city currently missing several skyscrapers, a fight of immeasurable proportions clear to see in the skyline above it. "That… isn't supposed to happen."

Mihou scowled, baby fangs flashing ever so slightly.

"He's not supposed to have full control of his powers until– Wait, no, what if–"

The Harbinger turned tail and sped off, into the main chambers of the mountain. Ao Lie and Mihou immediately ran after him. At some point, he had started walking on clouds, like the stories told, and that made him a lot faster. They were falling behind, but Ao Lie would be damned if they lost their best bet to a little footrace.

Ao Lie scooped Mihou into his arms, panting at the additional weight. Neither of the monkey brothers were heavy, and Ao Lie certainly wasn't physically weak given the machinery he worked with, but that didn't mean he was Sha Wujing. However, Ao Lie had his ways of making up for inadequacies.

Ao Lie clicked his left toe to his right heel, switching from his regular boots to his heelys– heelys that soon became full blown rocket shoes. Mihou tensed in shock and wrapped his tail around Ao Lie's arm, preparing himself for what was to come.

The Harbinger turned when he heard the screeching. He didn't stop, but it didn't seem that he needed to, watching as the two mortals associated with his successor caught up with a nifty invention of some kind, gaining speed until they were just below him.

"Hey!" the Harbinger called, "Cool shoes you got there!"

"Thanks!" Ao Lie replied. "Made them myself!"

"Tell me about them some time!"

The Harbinger took a sharp corner, Ao Lie following without a fuss. The Harbinger took a steep cloud slide down to an archway with a stone ceiling and a seal, but he left it open as he passed through.

The treasure room was messy but relatively organized; the room was divided into five sections with each section further divided into five kinds of treasure and then further sorted into two piles. Of course, only the Harbinger knew this. Ao Lie and Mihou's hearts dropped at the sight of the mess.

"How are we going to find what you need here?!" Ao Lie asked. "Megapolis will be gone by the time we find whatever it is you need–"

"Got it!"

"...I- I take it back."

The Harbinger walked back to them, twirling a golden circlet on his finger, in his other hand was a scroll he was reading through. "Alright, so," he starts. "Do you know anyone who could read ancient Chinese?"

"Yes." In fact, Mr. Sanzang would probably be happy to receive such an ancient scroll, or a copy of it.

"Alright, then," the Harbinger sighed, then tucked away both items. "It's for a last resort, though. I'm sure whatever you friend's doing can't be *that* bad, right?"

It was that bad.

"...You know, I was *really* hoping that Wukong would be on the defensive," the Harbinger murmured.

The damage Peng and Wukong had caused to the city was massive– Mihou might even consider it to be greater than the fight against Azure. While entire planes of land weren't squashed like when Azure had taken a step, several blocks of buildings had either straight indents or clean holes torn into them. The streets were mostly empty, but Mihou could spot some citizens hiding behind debris as if that was going to protect them from the fight.

"You two stay here, okay?" the Harbinger said. "I'll take care of this."

Peng was more durable than Azure Lion, Wukong realized. The fight had been going on for a while now, and he was sure that they'd each been rammed into a good amount of buildings, but neither was ready to back down from the fight.

"I could do this for *years,* simian," Peng mocked. "Can you really bear to grow up fighting me nonstop?"

"Well, I'm still here, aren't I?"

"Ha! Foolish child. Your story won't even make it to the gods!"

Wukong extended his staff again, making another dent in the road below. He vaulted himself over Peng and aimed for another strike. This time, he won't miss!

"Slow down there, buddy!"

"WHAT?!"

Wukong yelped as the staff retracted to its normal size, Wukong still holding onto it. On the other end, the Harbinger smiled at him. "Hey, pal, wanna slow your roll on the mass destruction?" he asked, gesturing to the city.

For the first time, Wukong took a good look at Megapolis, or what was left of it. The entire sector of the city was in ruins, but the damage was clear– damage mostly caused by Wukong's staff.

"*Oooohhh* boy…." Wukong winced, hugging the staff. He could hear the scolding he would be getting from Bajie already. He sheepishly turned to the Harbinger, only for his eyes to widen. "Behind you!"

The Harbinger barely turned his head towards Peng's incoming sword when Wukong swung from the staff to kick Peng square in the gut. The avian grunted from the impact before they were sent flying into the skies above.

"Buddy, you alright?" the Harbinger asked.

"Sorry, can't talk right now," Wukong huffed hurriedly. He reached over and grabbed the staff. "Can I borrow this, by the way? Thanks!"

"Wait–!"

Wukong blasted off, following after Peng at high speeds. Peng quickly came crashing down a moment later, just barely missing the Harbinger by hair before continuing their trip down and creating a large crater in the city below. The Harbinger cringed before Wukong followed swiftly after, further hammering Peng into the ground. The crater was clearly visible this high up; the Harbinger didn't want to think of what the damage was like up close.

"Hey, pal?" the Harbinger called, hopping off his cloud platform to fall a few hundred feet to get to the fight. Peng and Wukong were exchanging blows below, the shock waves shaking what little structures were left. "Wrap it up, maybe?"

"Yeah, sure! In a bit!" Wukong replied, punching Peng in the chest and sending them flying upwards into a row of buildings that promptly collapsed like jenga towers.

"Buddy?!" Harbinger tried again.

"*Wukong!*" The Harbinger turned to the distant building, where Wukong's friends stood, just outside the crater's range, thankfully.

The Harbinger turned his head back to where Wukong and Peng were fighting. They were wrestling, causing more damage now that they were on the ground. He could keep trying to get through to Wukong, but the Harbinger was a weak man, had always been sensitive to vulnerability; he would not stand for further destruction.

Wukong could swear that he was almost winning. Peng's shoulders had given under his strength, lowering dangerously. Peng had tried to kick him a few times, and it had hurt, but Wukong wasn't bleeding or anything, so it was safe to assume that nothing Peng threw at him was going to injure him. Wukong could work with this.

"Any moment now, little birdie~" Wukong whispered. Something underneath Peng cracked, but Wukong was sure that the land would hold.

Just a little more–

The ground broke.

It wasn't natural, either. Something smashed into the cement behind the two and caused the infrastructure to crumble, sending them both into the cold water below.

Peng had the advantage down there, easily overpowering Wukong, but then he was kicked away and was swiftly beaten up by a speedy figure that kicked him out of the water and what Wukong assumed was high in the sky. Wukong himself, meanwhile, was quickly sinking.

Wukong never learned how to swim. Given, he and Mihou *did* get swimming lessons when they were little– the various baby pictures with Sanzang and their sister as evidence– but for some reason, Wukong could never float. The instructors had said that Wukong was just the type of demon destined to sink, at least without floaties. Even with the Harbinger's powers, it seemed that he was just going to keep sinking.

As if summoned by his thoughts, the Harbinger himself appeared in front of Wukong, scooping him up and dragging him out of the water and onto dry land.

"You okay there, pal?" he asked, patting Wukong's back.

"Fine," Wukong coughed. "Peng— where's—"

"Don't worry about him–"

"THERE!"

"*Oh*, you've got to be kidding–" The Harbinger watched as Wukong blasted towards Peng, leaving another crater where he had launched off. "WUKONG, *PLEASE*–"

Wukong flew towards Peng, who was visibly injured but still flying. Peng saw him approaching and readied their swords, but before Wukong could make impact, the Harbinger got in between the two of them, taking Wukong's hit before promptly punting Peng until they were nothing more but a sparkle in the sky.

"ENOUGH!" he yelled, holding Wukong by the collar. He pulled something from behind his back and slammed it into Wukong's head.

It snugly wrapped around Wukong's temples, which instinctively led him to trying to take it off, but he quickly discovered that it wouldn't budge.

"That's enough, Wukong," the Harbinger repeated, softer this time. He put his hands on Wukong's shoulders, then gently ran one of them through his mane– when had he lost his bonnet?

"Wuh-wha?" Wukong mumbled, trying to forcibly take off whatever was around his head, but it still didn't move.

The Harbinger gently set Wukong onto a cloud platform. Thankfully, he didn't slip through like last time, but Wukong had bigger concerns, like what the Harbinger had put around his head.

With Wukong sufficiently distracted, the Harbinger turned around, taking in the damage done in the city, before breaking out a scroll of parchment and a brush. The scroll unraveled, long and magical. The Harbinger's brush was wet with fresh ink, and with it, he painted the landscape of Megapolis, with its tall buildings and tight roads, the busy offices and bustling

streets. When he rerolled the scroll, Megapolis was back to its full former glory– a bustling city back to its normal state. Even the damage that Azure had created was gone.

Behind him, Wukong suddenly whimpered in pain. The Harbinger flinched, but turned to Wukong, hunched over as the golden circlet glowed ever so slightly.

"Hey, hey, stop that," the Harbinger shushed, gently pulling Wukong's hands away from the circlet. "It's still adjusting itself. It's going to hurt more if you use too much of your powers right now."

"Why…?"

"Sorry, I didn't have anything else," the Harbinger replied sheepishly. He gently pet Wukong's mane again. "How about let's get you back to your friends, yeah?"

=O=

"Okay, so," the Harbinger announced, "if ever Wukong gets out of control like this again, just say the magic words, and that should get him to stop." He tossed a scroll to a constipated-looking Sanzang. Wujing, in contrast, was practically glowing with awe. Wukong was right there beside him, taking in how the Harbinger practically glowed with power, radiating confidence in the city he'd just rebuilt with a few brush strokes.

"Stop…how, exactly?" Sanzang asked.

"Just a little zap. Nothing that'll hurt too much."

Sanzang's gaze snapped to Wukong with an expression that told him to spill the beans before Sanzang scooped them out of Wukong himself.

"Of course," the Harbinger continued, "It wouldn't be much of a failsafe if it happened without anyone watching, so it *can* go off on its own, but nothing Wukong can't power through."

"It hurt a lot more earlier…" Wukong murmured, rubbing his temple, feeling the warm gold of the circlet. He was over it, really– over the buzz of power and adrenaline that had been with him throughout the fight. Plus, it was *the* Harbinger. What did Sanzang have to worry about?

"That shouldn't happen again, trust me!" the Harbinger reassured, though he immediately broke eye contact. "Except, of course, if you lose yourself in you power again. Which *won't* be happening again since you'll be training with me from now on!" He cheerfully yet evidently stiffly wrapped an arm around a starstruck Wukong.

"You mean he *wasn't* going to be training with you before?" Mihou asked. He didn't really look intimidating while ducked behind Wukong, holding his umbrella close to his chest, but

Wukong appreciated the concern- not that it was needed.

"I mean... Usually demons do better on their own!"

Sanzang and Mihou's stormy glares did not dampen Wujing and Wukong's moods.

"Well, if that's all, then you're free to swing by the mountain any time!" the Harbinger turned to Wukong. "You know your way up. The stairs should be good exercise. See you around, buddy!"

Everyone watched as the Harbinger promptly melted into a patch of black goo until all that was left was a beautifully written character for 'home' on freshly reconstructed concrete, and then that was gone too.

"So cool..." Wuking breathed.

"I wanna do that..." Wukong sighed.

"*There you guys are!*"

Everyone turned to the other side of the street, the one in the same direction as the weather station, standing proudly in the distance. Bajie was running down the street, evidently tired but still going at an impressive pace. "I've been looking everywhere! Answer your damn phones for once!"

"Ge!" Ao Lie called, the only one running towards Bajie and meeting him in the middle. He wrapped his arms around Bajie, spinning him around like a toy. "You came!"

"Of course I came!" Bajie grunted, hurriedly patting Ao Lie's back. "Would've been faster if you'd given me more to work with than a DDR cabinet and a text that said '*You know where*'!" Bajie yelled, pulling out his phone and angrily pointing at said conversation.

"Not a lot of places have DDR cabinets anymore, ge~!" Ao Lie chuckled happily.

"IT'S STILL TOO MANY!"

"There you are, Bajie!" Wukong waved cheerily. "Where've you been? You missed the fun part."

"*I've*-," Bajie panted, pushing away Ao Lie, "been trying- to stop you. From doing anything STUPID! What were you THINKING?"

"Aww, don't worry about it!" Wukong laughed, crossing his arms. "Everything's fine now. See?" he said, gesturing to the rebuilt street. "Like the whole fight *ne*~ver happened."

Bajie stomped over to Wukong, a dark aura around him. Wujing tried to step in between them, but was brushed off by Bajie. He walked up to Wukong, towering over his small form, but Wukong didn't flinch. Wukong rarely took Bajie seriously, not now, much less so before he married his adoptive sister.

"*Make sure* whatever happened today never happens again," Bajie whispered, punctuating his statement by shoving dirty and slightly damaged bonnet onto wukong's matted mane. "You got that, *Monkey King*?"

Wukong looked up, adjusting his newly retrieved bonnet over his head to look Bajie in the eye, except where he expected to find a furious demon, he was met with gruff and dubious relief, as if Bajie was mad that he felt relief for Wukong.

Oblivious to Bajie's nuanced expression, Wukong glared anyway. "At least I was doing something and didn't stay all the way down here, away from the fight."

"Why you little-!"

Wujing put a large hand on Bajie's torso and pushed him back several paces with the calmest and most done demeanor in the world. "How about we just be thankful that everything turned out alright? I don't know about you guys, but I could go for some noodles right now," he said.

"Ooooh!" Ao Lie chirped. "Same here! Bajie, c'mon, c'mon, I want noodlessss. And look, the Harbinger was nice enough to rebuild your apartment!" Ao Lie wrapped an arm around Bajie and forced him to look at the former glory of Bajie Mian, built good as new but still bearing the atrocious sign Bajie's father-in-law had made out of spite and Bajie was obligated to use.

"Um, I guess you don't have to tell him that it's fixed?" Wujing suggested.

Bajie took a deep breath.

And then screamed.

=O=

"So the Harbinger *is* involved," Yellowtusk murmured. "But *why*?"

"Whatever the reason, if we try to do anything, his successor will be there," Peng murmured bitterly, angrily shining their blades. "And if his successor's there, then he's sure to follow."

"We're *not* giving up," Azure growled. "This world deserves to be freed from the Jade Emperor's reign."

"Who said we were giving up, brother?" Peng growled. "We'll simply need to recruit… reinforcements."

"I would rather not," Yellowtusk grumbled.

"Do you have any *other* suggestions?"

Chapter 3: Robes Don't Make A Monk

Chapter Summary

> They’d entered the mall with the sun still high in the sky, but now the sky was blue with the longer nights of autumn.
> “Fifteen minutes, huh?” Bajie grumbled, pointedly looking at Mihou and Wukong, who innocently looked away.
>
> AKA
> The appearance and background dump chapter with some plot.

Mihou didn't really like the mall. It was loud and crowded, though there was a comfort in the animosity of being lost in the crowd. He preferred the tens of voices of the night market. Some streets had speakers that played god awful music to grab people's attention, but most vendors agreed that that was a terrible idea, and Mihou preferred it that way. The noise felt more natural.

Unfortunately, Bajie wasn't as much of a fan of the night market. Mihou was pretty sure it was because he had bad experiences in his college days, but that was none of his business. (Or at least that was what he told people. Wukong didn't call him the Six-Eared Macaque when they were little for nothing.) Hence, the mall trip.

"This is nice and all," Wukong said, tail flicking in anxiousness- as much as he liked to play up the careless troublemaker act up, he didn't like the mall as much as Mihou did, "but I still don't get why we're here."

"You're both growing out of your clothes," Bajie replied, gruff as ever. "Your dad'll kill me if he sees any photo of you two with too small clothes." So he said, but with the way the pig stood, you'd think that *he* was their dad.

Bajie was tall for a pig demon, but he was still quite stout and didn't quite make it to five feet. In fact, he was a solid pack of 4'5" muscle and not the kind of chef you'd want to anger. His skin was more peach than pink, making him appear more similar to an actual pig than his kin. He had a wonderful skin routine, though, much to Ao Lie's chagrin back when they were in college. His eyebrows were bushy, whiskers thick and sturdy– the kind that a spiteful 12-year-old Mihou would pull on whenever he got too close to his sister. Bajie typically dressed casually, with old shirts and paired with just as old pants, belts, and shoes. He had nicer outfits for when he met with his in-laws, but most of the time, his clothes were meant for comfort and manual labor rather than office jobs and formal gatherings.

"Aww, how sweet of you to treat them to a shopping trip, though!" Sun Ni, Bajie's wife and Wukong and Mihou's sister, said. She was practically glowing with fondness for her husband.

"You didn't have to! They're my brothers; I could afford to pay for them."

Bajie snorted. "What kind of husband would I be if I let my wife spend her hard earned money on something I could perfectly afford? Save your earnings for something you actually want. Let's go; your brothers look like they're about to book it." Arms crossed, Bajie made his way deeper into the mall, Ni lovingly hooking her hand around his elbow.

They looked like a cute couple– the kind that won against all odds, and they did. The Sun family was a prestigious one, a force to be reckoned with in the farming industry, while Bajie was just an office worker. Sun Ni was considered the most sought after woman in the neighborhood while Bajie was considered ugly, even by demon standards due to his similarities to a regular pig. Bajie was practically all on his own during his suitorship while Ni had two overprotective anklebiters at her every beck and call.

Ni was not tall, and she was just short enough that she could comfortably hook her arm under Bajie's elbow without discomfort. Her hair used to be long, falling to her knees in a low ponytail to mimic her brothers' tails, but ever since her marriage, she'd cut it short and kept them in a low pair of pigtails instead. Her complexion was clear, much like her husband's– in fact, Mihou wasn't entirely sure who shared their skincare secrets first– and she had enough meat under her skin that the only person who would be calling her skinny would be her grandmother. Being raised the way that she was, her wardrobe was more refined– composed primarily of qipaos and hanfus, but today, she'd chosen to match her husband in his tattered casual look but somehow made the dress she'd worn the most in college look good as new.

Wukong squawked in indignation. "I do NOT!"

Mihou sighed and wrapped his tail around Wukong's wrist, dragging him forward.

Their preferred store was something that their father would *never* let them go to– a preloved clothes thrift store. Their father only wanted the best for them– meaning freshly manufactured and tailored fits every time, but while both Mihou and Wukong loved the smell of fresh cotton and the look of crisp clothes, the feeling of the fabric against their fur was too stiff– too unnatural. Secondhand clothing had already been used and washed at least a few times, and though they reeked of strangers, it wasn't anything a quick spin with their preferred detergent and a trip to a blanket fort wouldn't fix.

Bajie was not their father. Though as much as they both disliked him, Bajie was cool.

"Okay, same old, same old," Bajie said at the entrance. "Get whatever you want, make sure it doesn't have any lice on it– *I will shave you both if I catch you scratching*– try it on and text us every hour."

"An hour's too long," Wukong murmured. "I could get it done in fifteen minutes."

"Says you– the one who takes *two hours* to pick out an outfit."

"Hey!"

Mihou snickered.

"You don't get to laugh about it," Bajie glared, "You take *four*. How do you even manage to take so long in a store?"

"I don't!" Wukong denied at the same time Macaque said, "It's a process."

"A-Ni and I will be meeting the others just over there," Bajie continued, pointing at a coffee shop across the hall. "If you come to us, make sure you are *not* carrying anything you don't own, got it?"

Mihou and Wukong murmured their agreements, unhappy with all the rules despite their simplicity. The adults went off, leaving the two monkeys to their own devices.

"If you see a hanfu, it's mine," Mihou said.

"It always is," Wukong grumbled, as if he had any interest in traditional clothing.

The search was as enjoyable as ever. Despite his desire to leave as soon as possible, Wukong was excitedly going through piles and racks of clothing like they were treasure troves, not that Mihou could complain when he was doing the same with equal vigor. They didn't know how much time had passed, but they'd both gathered their equal shares of potential wardrobe items. There was a distinct palette to their own baskets as well, though they both were mainly composed of red, gold, and black. Macaque had more dark tones than bright ones while Wukong had thrown in some blues and whites at some point.

At some point during their search, Ao Lie had joined them.

Mihou was pretty sure it's because they'd missed the check in and the adults had sent in their most phone addicted member as a chaperone, but the age difference between Ao Lie and the monkeys was only five years at most, so while Ao Lie *did* qualify as an adult, his mind was still squarely in the kid category. Ao Lie would probably not be going back to the coffee shop for additional conversation, but his presence guaranteed regular check-ins– probably one every fifteen minutes with his love for keeping all the blackmail. (Ao Lie didn't actually have any use for the blackmail; it was for Sanzang– the scholar was moral but he was not beyond hoarding embarrassing information.)

Another bonus of having Ao Lie in their party: his affinity to traditional clothing; perfect for Mihou's tastes.

Ao Lie himself was also very appreciative of traditional clothing due to his similar upbringing, though he was more liberal about it than Mihou. His wardrobe was mostly composed of greens and whites, with hanfus that were either unfit for formal occasions, or intentionally tailored wrong to piss off his family. His favorite combination was that of a shuhe with the optional shirt underneath, trousers, and white platform boots, as if the man didn't already tower over most of his friends. He was also fond of jewelry– though his arms and hands were clear because he often worked on mechanics. As if to make up for it, he had multiple ear and brow piercings that were never left undecorated for a moment, even during formal events when he was wearing his best clothes (Mihou knew it was on purpose). His hair was long and black, falling to his thighs when untied, but he often kept it in a high ponytail as if that actually did anything, but he'd let Mihou and Wukong groom it whenever

they'd ask, so Mihou only brought up his grievances about it once. That one time being when Ao Lie dyed his bangs his favorite shade of green and made him look like a spring onion.

"This looks like it'll fit you," Ao Lie said, raising a gold hanfu– it was too long for Mihou, but given his species not only a demon, but also a monkey, it was to be expected. "Looks like something Wukong would wear, though."

Mihou held out his basket anyway.

At some point, Ao Lie was assigned as their mule and carried two extra baskets per monkey by the time they were ready to fit.

Fortunately for Bajie's wallet, the monkeys had only ended up with a third of the things they'd initially chosen. It had apparently taken two hours for them to pick their clothes, another two to fit them all, and then an hour sorting through them to see which ones they wanted to keep. By the time they were at the checkout counter, Bajie looked like he was the one who didn't want to be in the mall in the first place while Mihou and Wukong looked like they were ready to raid another store.

While Sanzang helped the poor cashier log all the clothes, Wujing kept the two entertained with legends, though they were more Wukong's thing. Mihou could still appreciate a good story, though, and it was a tough competition between Wujing and Sanzang on who was the better storyteller.

"The Harbinger was known to only have one best friend," Wujing said. "Most people have more over the course of their life, but the Harbinger is so loyal that he only had one: the Jade Dragon General."

"*Oooooh.*"

"He met her after he'd left Master Subodhi. She was just as strong as him in every way, able to equal him in every strike. Her sword is said to be made of jade and could strike down even the toughest immortals!"

Wujing wasn't an animated man. His movements were slow and careful, though most times they weren't– having shattered many fragile things with his carelessness. Even after coming out of veterinary school, he was woefully prone to it. Despite that, he was a pillar of stability, even when Mihou knew there was always a chance that he'd accidentally be thrown off whenever he'd climb onto Wujing.

Wujing himself was a demon, with scales blue scales similar to the sea and red hair and beard that used to stick up all over the place, which in combination with his lab coat made him look like a mad scientist. He'd kept it neater since then, the natural curls making his hair look like coral despite how soft it actually was. Most of the time, he was wearing a lab coat even during his off hours– what with how many strays he'd take in whenever he'd walk down the street, but on some days like this one, he'd ditch the coat and show off his arms, though he always wore cargo pants to keep small animals in whenever he'd come across them.

"There's also a saying that the chipped shards from her sword are what jade bangles came from," Sanzang chimed in, still diligently helping the cashier like the gentleman he was. "Superstition says that jade bangles would shatter when they catch life threatening disasters for their holders, sacrificing itself for the wearer."

Sanzang was the only other human in the friend group. He'd grown up alongside Ni and was the one who brought the friends together in the first place. He was a scholar of ancient texts, but since his agency wasn't a big one, they also doubled as a small educational institute from middle school to high school students. The classes were small, and Mihou and Wukong used to be a part of them, but every student who graduated was typically a special one. Now, though, he was the monkeys' personal tutor since they didn't go to school anymore.

Sanzang was a good deal taller than Ni, but he was only average height and was short compared to Ao Lie and Wujing. He constantly shaved his head, but let it grow to something of a buzz cut upon Mihou and Wukong's request because they loved to run their palms over the upright strands. Like Ao Lie, he had piercings, but only one pair and they housed large, black earrings that monks had, though not nearly the same size. Perhaps one day, but right now they were still just barely bigger than a ping pong ball. He was also an enjoyer of traditional clothing, but more often than not, he'd just get whatever was comfortable and within his color palette– being mostly orange and brown– and was something that he could wear to upper class exhibits whenever he was invited. He had a tailored suit, but that was from back when Ni was getting married, and Mihou knew because he was there to watch as Sanzang slowly died on the inside as his minimalist philosophy was put through the grinder through every measuring season and final price tag of the suit (which the Sun family was more than happy to pay for but something Sanzang still felt guilty about).

Eventually, their clothes were accounted for and they were ready to go.

They'd entered the mall with the sun still high in the sky, but now the sky was blue with the longer nights of autumn.

"Fifteen minutes, huh?" Bajie grumbled, pointedly looking at Mihou and Wukong, who innocently looked away.

=O=

Wukong was good at many things, and sewing was one of them. In the past, whenever they'd get new clothes, their father would get it sent to the family tailor to fit them if the clothes weren't made to order already. However, now that the Sun Patriarch wasn't here to dog on a seamstress, Wukong had taken to adjusting their clothes to their side. Ni wanted to do it, but her work hours at the hospital combined with her general lack of ability immediately put her at a disadvantage against Wukong, who had picked up the hobby at some point without anyone knowing for the one moment when he'd be able to show off.

"How does it fit?" Wukong asked, watching Mihou twirl in front of the mirror in a black zhiju freshly adjusted to his size, the cuffs not going past his knuckles and the hem not going below his ankles, which wasn't traditional, but it certainly let Macaque move along easier. There was also a little hole cut in the back for his tail, which was always appreciated. His

brother even went the extra mile to change the blue lining it originally had to red. Mihou didn't know why he did it, but th at was nice of him.

"Really good," Mihou said, giving one more twirl.

"Oh, I also found this, actually." Wukong reached into the blanket fort they were going to be sleeping in instead of their beds for the foreseeable future to make sure the new garments smelled like them and pulled out a black poncho with a mandarin collar. Wukong had also stitched red lining into it, matching it to the zhiju.

Mihou ran over and snatched the overcoat from Wukong's hands, turning it over and running back to the mirror, clipping the poncho. It was warm and went just past his elbows. It was a little big, but he'd grow into it.

Overall, the outfit was just up his alley. The colors matched his black fur and red birthmark. The gold threads of the mandarin collar matched the dull gold of his eyes. The style was traditional, just the way he liked it, and comfortable. It was a bit warm, especially when taking into account his fur, but Mihou could deal, for the sake of fashion.

"You seem happy," Wukong chuckled.

"You're not?" Mihou asked, snickering.

He got a pillow in the face for that one.

=O=

Mihou didn't like nightmares, and he barely had any. That didn't make having them a welcome experience.

Red was both their color. It matched the ginger of Wukong's fur and the warm undertone of Mihou's skin. Mihou didn't want to be sitting in a pool of it, though. The staff was red. It was also gold, and not the dull, raw kind that Mihou had in his eyes– the bright, polished type that was reflected in Wukong's.

Wukong liked golds and yellows. It made him look sunnier, in Mihou's opinion. Blues were also a good look, though Wukong preferred teal.

Would the teal of murky waters be preferable to the red of Wukong's blood?

Wukong's favorite hoodie was a bright yellow gold that had black sleeves with teal stripes that was a size too big on him, but he said he preferred it that way. He'd paired it with red pants the same shade as the lining he'd put on Mihou's clothes, and a pair of sneakers he'd painted teal to match his hoodie. At some point, Wukong had picked up dressmaking, and his first wearable creation was a yellow gold bonnet with a white hemline and bow. Between him and Mihou, he wasn't the one in the kitchen with Bajie, so it was a wonder why he was the one that needed to keep his mane in check, but he wore it everywhere anyway.

All that, soaked in blood.

The peach birthmark had gone pale, near invisible against equally white skin. Mihou knew where his eyes were, but when he'd looked, he didn't see them. That was fine. This was a nightmare, after all.

The blood that spilled from Wukong turned black, the wounds he couldn't see glowing teal. Maybe it wasn't a nightmare, maybe it was a dream.

Something cold creeped in from the edges of the void– a blue tinge flowing over Wukong until his whole body looked like it was fresh out of the freezer. It was a hue off, but this was the color Wukong glowed before he'd turned into that large monster-like form, right?

Wrong.

Wukong opened his eyes, and they were blue.

Mihou decided that he didn't like the color blue after all.

Chapter 4: Shedding Season

Chapter Summary

"How'd you know that the clones would go rogue if I left him alone for too long?"

"Isn't it obvious? They're my powers, buddy, so of course I know how they work."

Wukong hummed. "So….. do you have any rogue clones?"

"...We don't talk about the porty."

Chapter Notes

This week's chapter has periods in line breaks because I couldn't get them in otherwise.

Sun Ni blinked. "I thought you loved the sign Fuqin made you."

"Aha, well, it got destroyed in that whole mystic ritual thing a few weeks ago, and since we've been saving for a bit, I thought that it'd be nice to upgrade a bit, you know what I'm saying?" Bajie replied nervously.

Sun Ni laughed. "Don't sweat it too much, baobei. I know dad was just giving you a hard time," she said, pecking him on the cheek. "I can't say I hate it. In fact, I think I like this a lot more."

Zhu Bajie's noodle shop's original theme had a hereditary family business aesthetic, which would be charming if said theme didn't look like the 'family' business was passed down from all the way back from ancient China with zero maintenance. Even more ironic was that Bajie's family didn't own a noodle shop; they didn't even have their own business. The new branding went about the theme more conventionally, with dark wood supports and upturned purple-tiled roofs. There was even some modern influence with a large neon sign above the shop of the new logo– a solar eclipse with the sun's rays shining out one side and the words 'Ni Ni Noodles' written in stylized calligraphy. The walls were painted like the dawn sky, going from dark purple at the top to a light pink at the bottom and complete with stars and clouds.

"Oh? Never took you as the narcissistic type, Jiejie," Mihou teased, popping up from behind her.

"I can appreciate a good brand, Mihou," Sun Ni replied, lightly pulling on his ear. His other ear fluttered in annoyance.

"*Noooooo*~"

"A-jie, A-jie!" Wukong called, popping up on her other side. "You should see the inside!" He nudged his sister forward, pushing her through midnight blue curtains and into the shop.

The crown molding and baseboards were gold, and the walls were painted to imitate the grain of dark wood, probably to cut on unnecessary costs since the walls were already made of concrete and most likely painted by Wukong. There were several ink paintings that were also no doubt made by Wukong. The tables and chairs were made of actual dark wood, and decorated with lanterns for centerpieces that were no doubt Mihou's doing. Similar lanterns also hung from strings above the counter like string lights.

"Do you like it?" Wukong asked. "I wanted to paint the walls differently, but Bajie said I couldn't."

"That's because I'm running a restaurant, not a bar, you dimwitted monkey!" Bajie said. "I already let you go ham on the outside!"

"It was expensive, but Bajie was more than willing to cover all the expenses," Mihou commented.

"Hey!"

Sun Ni chuckled fondly, pecking her husband on the cheek and patting both her brothers' heads. "You all did *great*." She combed her fingers behind Mihou's ear– the same side that had a dragon fruit print bandaid on it– and ran her thumb between Wukong's eyebrows, but paused when she felt something there. It was too hard to be the knot of the white ribbon of his bonnet, and she didn't know what else it could be. She hooked her thumb under the hem and pulled it away, surprised to see a golden circlet around his forehead. "What's this?"

"Huh? OH! I haven't told you yet, A-Jie!" Wukong said, brushing her hand away and hiding the circlet under his bonnet. "I'm the Harbinger of Chaos's successor! Can you believe it?"

"Um… that's nice?"

"It's a big deal, A-Jie! I'm going to be training with him and fighting bad guys and, and–!"

"Basically your little brother here's super strong now," Bajie summarized, firmly placing a hand on Wukong's head to stop him from vibrating out of existence. "That's all you need to know for now. Be*cause* he's still *at work*."

"Pft, nah, I think I'm going to stay and talk with A-Jie a little longer."

"You see her *everyday*! You eat dinner with her everyday too, so don't you use that excuse on me!"

From the outside, a little boy on skates watched as Wukong flew out of the restaurant with arms full of take out noodles, landing on his behind. Wukong grumbled as he got up and hopped to his (new) tuktuk and got to work.

=O=

"Ni Ni Noodles!"

"Ni Ni Noodles!"

"Ni Ni Noodles!"

"Ni Ni Noo– *AAAAAAAAAA*!" Wukong shoved Wujing's order into his hands and ran behind him. "Rabbits?!" he gasped, leaning over the pen gates and eyes wide over the pack of snowballs hopping around in it.

Wujing nodded once, a smile on his face as he watched Wukong reach down and pet them all. "Perfect timing, actually, Wukong. If you can spare a moment, why don't you help me bathe them?"

Wukong's pupils couldn't have possibly blown wider. "Of course!"

.

"*Wukong!"*

Wukong slowed his tuktuk to a stop outside of an office building– a small, run down one that looked more like a trinkets shop owned by an old couple rather than an archeology center that doubled as a school.

"Perfect timing," Sanzang said, running up to him. "If you have a moment, can you deliver this to Ao Lie? His family commissioned me to study it, so here's the artifact itself as well as the study."

"I can spare a minute," Wukong said, tucking the booklet and the box– about the size of Wukong's head but light enough that he could hold it in one hand– into a side compartment allotted for Wukong's personal belongings, but he never used.

"You're a lifesaver, Wukong! Oh, here's something for your troubles." Sanzang took Wukong's empty hands and put a few peach candies into them– candies that Wukong was *always* happy to have.

.

"*Ugh*, this old thing?" Ao Lie groaned, leafing through the booklet that had Sanzang's study. "As if they didn't know everything there was to know about it already."

"What is it, anyway?"

Ao Lie, despite being unfond of his family, still handled the box with care as he opened it and revealed an old wooden lantern, somehow still preserved despite how old it probably was. "A nightlight, apparently. According to Sanzang-ge's study, it can't be more than 300 years old." Ao Lie checked the artifact to make sure it was snug in the box before resealing it and putting the study away. "Next time you see Sanzang, let him know that my dad will get it… eventually."

Wukong was pretty sure that he wasn't supposed to hear that last part, so he didn't say anything.

"Anyway, do you want to help me build a bike?"

"Can I have one?"

"Don't be ridiculous, you're too short for it."

"Awww…"

"You can paint it when I'm done, though!"

"YES!"

.

Wukong yawned, falling face first into his bed, curling up into a ball and shuffling himself underneath the blankets. Today was a good day; the bunnies, Sanzang's candy, Ao Lie's machines… Sun Ni had even had the energy to see the shop in daylight rather than at night when she left for her shift at the hospital. Actually, today was so good that Bajie had made peach pie! There was only one thing missing, but Wukong supposed that he could stand to go without—

"Psst! Wukong!" Someone hopped onto him, bouncing the bed like a child. "Wukong, wake up!"

"Hrrmpph?"

"C'mon, wakie, wakie!" Mihou whispered, but his voice was light and his body was excitable. He threw off Wukong's blankets and forced him off the bed. "We're going to the night market! There's a new theatre troupe in town, and I wanna be there!"

"I thought you didn't like loud noises?" Wukong tiredly asked.

"Bet you can't beat me at the games."

"Oh, you are *on*."

Actually, on second thought, Wukong could live like this *everyday*.

=O=

"Order up!"

"Yeah, yeah!"

.

"Cats?!"

"You can brush them–"

"GIMME."

.

"You have a GPS, right? Can you deliver this for me?"

"Do you have candy?"

"Of course."

"Deal."

.

"Wukong? What are you doing here, shouldn't you be at work?"

"I can spare a moment!"

"Well, who am I to say no to a little more help?"

.

"They're hosting auditions for a street play!"

"..."

"Oooooookay, right... How about we go play a few more games."

"*Please*."

.

"...You look awful."

"And you look like a burnt piece of bacon everyday, but do I comment?"

.

"Wukong, if you need sleep, you can take a nap."

"But the *puppiesssssss*."

.

"I feel like I shouldn't be letting you go out like this."

"How far is it?"

"About fifteen minutes?"

"Give it here."

.

"Wukong, ever heard of aegyo sal?"

"You said you wanted a dragon on your bike?"

"Geez, touche."

.

"...Wuss."

"You haven't even asked, and no I am *not* going to miss a night."

.

"Party pack delivery!"

"That's going to cost you extra, Mr. Sanzang."

"Do I look like Sanzang to you?! Don't test me, Sun Wukong!"

.

"Wukong?"

"Yes?"

"I don't recall the client asking for a dye job on their pet."

"..."

"Nice dragon, though."

.

"Ni Ni Noodles!"

"I didn't order any noodles?"

"You didn't?"

"I don't even like noodles."

"... Wait a minute… OH! Package from Tang-laoshi!

"Oh, and I'm *so* judging you for not liking noodles, just so you know."

.

"Does petting the bike with a grooming brush make it shine or something?"

"...*don't* tell Mihou."

"Um, okay?"

"...

"*Don't you DARE tell A-Jie either!*"

.

"I..beat you?"

"No you didn't!"

"Wukong, you just fell asleep in the middle of the game–"

"REMATCH."

=O=

"Good morning, Wukong," Sun Ni greeted as he entered the kitchen of their apartment. "Did you lose to xiaodi last night? You look like you've barely slept."

"I'm *fine*, A-Jie," Wukong yawned, and then proceeded to take an upside down glass from the dryer, pour water into the bottom of it, and then drink from said bottom, completely oblivious to the puddle underneath his feet and the large wet stain on his clothes– which Sun Ni doubted had been washed yet. "Mihou's the one who couldn't handle it. He doesn't even wake up before noon anymore!" he said, hopping onto the kitchen counter, a good distance away from Sun Ni.

Sun Ni chuckled, pushing over the fruit basket to Wukong's side, watching as he took the peach and bit into it with a wince. "It's overripe."

"And you're overworked."

"I'm not *overworked*," Wukong defended. "I still wake up on time, I go to work on the dot, *and* I still have time to help Wujing, Sanzang, *and* Ao Lie, and *then* go to the night market with Mihou!"

"Uh-huh, tell that to Mihou when he grows taller than you."

Wukong spluttered, "Hey! He doesn't sleep much, either! And what am I, five?"

"Mad that it's true?"

"Pft, *no*!"

"Well, what are you gonna do about it?"

"Nothing!" Wukong said, kicking his feet onto the counter, and then politely putting them down when Sun Ni knocked them away with a flick of a finger. "I'm living my best life: helping my friends, grooming animals, painting bikes, spending time with Mihou? What's there to hate?"

Sun Ni sighed. "The correct answer was self-control, but I guess I can't talk to a guy who thinks he can make clones of himself."

Wukong scoffed. "Clones? Do I look like the Harbinger to you?"

"Hmmm, didn't you joke with me a few days ago about you being his successor?"

"*Joke*? That wasn't a joke, A-Jie, but what do you want me to do, cut myself and bleed out another me? Pass."

"Isn't blowing on hair more common in legends?"

"Uh *huh*, so you're saying that if I plucked my hair out like this and blew on it, I'd get a clone?" Wukong scoffed, not paying any more attention to the strand of hair he'd blown away for demonstration. "A-Jie, be real."

There was a sneeze behind Wukong. Both Sun Ni and Wukong turned, thinking it was Mihou, only to jump in surprise when there stood another Wukong, the same in every way except for the lack of eye bags. The clone turned to them, expression one of confusion but lighting up upon seeing Sun Ni.

"Oh, good morning, A-Jie!"

"Mihou–?"

"I was joking, but this changes *EVERYTHING!"* Wukong yelled, excitedly circling the clone.

There was an angry thump from the hall, presumably from Mihou waking up from Wukong's volume and throwing the nearest thing at the door to get him to shut up. Wukong froze, tail curled, before he went back to the clone, vibrating with much more energy than he had two minutes ago.

"This is so *awesome!* But how do I…" Wukong thought for a moment, before flicking the clone in the forehead, right where the ends of the circlet met underneath the cover of the bonnet. The clone disappeared in an explosion of hair. In a blink, the short time it had been alive flashed behind Wukong's eyes. Wukong squealed in happiness.

In the background, Sun Ni was stunned.

"Thanks for the help, A-Jie!" Wukong yelled, wrapping all his limbs around his sister. "Never could've done it without you! I gotta go! Have a good rest!"

Sun Ni watched in stunned silence as Wukong slammed the apartment door closed, followed by his loud footsteps in the restaurant below.

"Should- Should I be worried?"

=O=

"Any more orders, Bajie?"

Bajie squinted at Wukong, standing at the entrance to the kitchen. That was odd. Usually, Wukong would be avoiding work until Bajie rang him up to scold him. A quick glance at the clock also revealed that he was also usually helping Wujing around this time. Bajie would be angrier, but it was *Wujing,* who could be mad at Wujing for long?

"Uhh… no, not really."

"Really? Alright, then. I'll be outside if you need me."

Something was off. Bajie wasn't going to complain about it, though. Whatever Wukong wanted to do was his business.

.

"You sure you've got nothing better to do?" Wujing asked, watching as Wukong snuggled with the doves. The corners of his eyes were pinkish. Was he wearing eyeliner? It was a poor choice of color, in Wujing's opinion. It was just purple enough to be distinguishable from his birthmark at first glance, but it was still too similar a color for it to look good.

"Nope!" Wukong replied, cooing with the doves.

"...If you say so."

.

"Are you… really just going to sit there and wait for something to deliver?" Sanzang asked, warily eyeing Wukong, sitting on the shelf to the side of the room. It was like he was a cat or something.

"Kinda? I mean, I could do anything you want me to."

"For a treat?"

"That's how this works, Mr. Sanzang."

"Hm, alright then…"

.

"You don't need to draw every scale, Wukong," Ao Lie called from the other side of the workshop, where he was already working on an improved version of the bike. "I don't think I'm going to be using that any time soon."

The first bike had been finished for a while now, but when he'd taken it for a test run, it wasn't up to his standards, so he'd gone back to the drawing board and was already working on a second one. However, Wukong was still pouring over the details of the white dragon on the side of the prototype.

"Don't sweat it, Ao Lie! I'm just practicing for the final one!"

"If you say so!" Ao Lie chuckled, but threw a glance back at Wukong anyway. He saw his tail flick– once, twice.

Wukong was working with green, wasn't he? Maybe that was why a good chunk of his tail was green?

=O=

"Har–harbinger!"

The Harbinger glided to the entrance of the cave, as if he hadn't been waiting for his successor ever since he'd given him the official invitation.

"Buddy! Glad you could finally make it!" he said, giving Wukong a moment to catch his breath. Ah, right, the stairs. "You alright?"

"Yeah! Better than alright! All warmed up, even!" Wukong said. "Now–" He whipped out the staff where he'd been keeping it attached to his back. "-where do we start?"

The Harbinger laughed, then gently angled the staff down. "How about the basics, hm?" It shouldn't take long; his friends wouldn't even notice he was gone!

=O=

"I thought you didn't want to audition?" Mihou asked, but not complaining as Wukong filled out both their application forms for the stage play auditions.

"But you want to, right?" Wukong asked.

"But you hate performing."

"Well– Yeah." Wukong's tail flicked in nervousness. "But you *love* it, so I figured that we'd give it a shot."

"You… don't have to."

"Hey, don't sweat it, xiongdi!" Wukong laughed, wrapping an arm around Mihou. "Let's give it a shot, alright?"

"Right…"

That should've been Mihou's first sign that something wasn't quite right, but he'd been too excited at the prospect of a stage to complain.

=O=

"You're picking up this stuff really quickly, Wukong!" the Harbinger complimented, watching as Wukong ran through the basic forms flawlessly. "I don't think I've seen anyone learn as fast as you!"

Not that the Harbinger had had much company for a *long* time.

"Isn't it time you head back, though?"

"Huh? Why? How long's it been?" Wukong asked.

The Harbinger looked up, eyeing the sky above them. It was around afternoon, the sky mostly blue but with an evident orange tinge. From this angle, sunlight was beating down strongly on them, but they were shaded just enough by the trees. This area of the mountain wasn't quite as densely shaded as the gallery– it was a nice, wide clearing that left them plenty of space– it was probably bigger than Wukong's childhood home, and the Sun estate in Megapolis was already big by a normal citizen's standards.

"It couldn't have been that long, could it?" the Harbinger mused.

"Then I can stay a little longer."

"Uh… you sure, buddy?" the Harbinger asked. "Won't your friends miss you?"

"Don't worry about it, I have it covered!"

=O=

"Come *on*, Bajie! You can't tell me that *this* is the best you can do!"

Bajie spluttered. "'Best'? Wukong, it's not my fault when customers don't come at all hours of the day!"

"Actually, it is! What kind of business isn't earning money at every minute? You're just lazy!"

Bajie threw a mop in Wukong's direction, the head hitting him square in the face and throwing him out to the empty restaurant proper. When the mop fell away as he got up, Bajie got a little more upset to see that the violent purple paint that completely covered his peach-shaped birthmark didn't smudge.

Wukong growled. "Throw it at me again! I'll dodge it this time!"

"What?!"

"I said throw it at me again!" Wukong yelled, tossing the mop at Bajie, who caught it easily. "I'll dodge it!"

"What are you–"

"Or are you just too busy running a terrible business to throw it? *Of* course."

"Wha– hey!"

"No wonder Fuqin hated you; you can't even run a good noodle shop. *Psht*."

"Alright, that's it! OUT!"

"Can't even take a monkey, what a *shame*. I'm sure Fuqin will be happy to hear all of this." Wukong reached into his pocket, probably for his phone. For a moment, Bajie was worried. Patriarch Sun was powerful enough to end his career, but Bajie noted with a sick satisfaction that Wukong didn't have his phone on him. Knowing that monkey, he wouldn't have memorized his own father's number either.

"OUT!"

.

"What's with the make-up, Wukong?" Wujing asked.

Wukong's tail– the tip the same pink as the elaborate liner around his eyes– flicked in acknowledgement, but he didn't reply. Wujing walked over to Wukong's spot in the small clinic that doubled as a grooming salon. The monkey was mesmerized with the mice that ran around him, kept from skittering off by the generous size of the pen– usually reserved for larger pets, but it seemed that Wukong had left the bedazzled little guys loose in it.

"Wukong?" Wujing called, reaching out towards Wukong, but promptly getting his hand slapped away by his tail. Hard.

Uh oh.

.

Sanzang entered his office, finding the place a mess. In the center of it all was Wukong, rifling through his desk and throwing papers into the air. He was muttering something repeatedly, obsessed with something that Sanzang had a sinking feeling that it had something to do with him.

"...Wukong?" he hesitantly called.

Wukong's gaze flicked up to him, his face bearing stripes of the wrong shade of orange. He growled and leapt at Sanzang, who closed the door in his face, hearing the painful beat of Wukong against the door. He pulled out the key and promptly locked the door.

"It's probably just a sugar rush, right?"

.

Ao Lie had seen it coming from a mile away.

.

Mihou had not.

=O=

"Hey it's been sunset for a while, hasn't it?" Wukong asked.

"Hm? Oh, yeah, the sky here is the same as the one in heaven. Time runs differently here, but you should probably head back." the Harbinger explained, looking up at the dusk.

"How long's it been since we started?"

"Down there? Like, a day?" the Harbinger replied, getting up and dusting himself off. "Sorry to keep you here for so long. Your family's probably missing you."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about it," Wukong said, on his back and staring at the sunlight that slipped between the leaves. "I left them some clones!"

The Harbinger paused, looking at Wukong for a long moment, like he was trying to process what he just said. "First of all: Credit where credit's due- that's *really* impressive. Second: You *WHAT*?"

=O=

"GET OUT OF MY KITCHEN, WUKONG!" Bajie yelled, trying to pull a hyper focused monkey away from the stove by a purple tail. "Where's the behaved one when you need him?!"

Wukong's lower half was in the air now, but whether or not he felt anything as Bajie tried to pull him away was outweighed by his determination to continue to cook his disaster.

"Not now, Bajie! I'm trying to up your business here!"

"No one's gonna eat whatever you're making; it's a disaster! My ancestors are rolling their graves!"

"*BAJIE!"*

Bajie turned to the entrance of the kitchen, where there was *another* Wukong, the same as Bajie had always known him. "Wh-What happened here?"

Bajie pointedly did not look at the mess that was currently his kitchen. "Really, Wukong?" he asked instead, calmly. Completely okay with the current state of his workplace. "Mystic

monkey business? So soon?"

Wukong chuckled nervously and leapt past Bajie and hit the purple Wukong on the forehead with his staff, hard. The purple monkey disappeared in a burst of hair that Bajie was 100% going to make Wukong clean up.

"OI–"

"Sorry, can't talk, gotta go!" Wukong said, keeping his momentum and leaving through the backdoor.

…would Sun Ni mind if he grounded her little brother for the foreseeable future?

.

"Wujing!" Wukong called, skidding on the sidewalk and falling onto his side. He quickly got up and violently slammed the door to the clinic open. "WUJING!"

The vet was at the counter, managing finances, but he turned his attention to Wukong, then to the other Wukong in the pen, surrounded by animals.

"Mystic monkey business?" Wujing asked. "So soon?"

The pink Wukong turned from where it was fussing over a sugar glider. "Hey, King!" it called, "Look! Isn't it cute?"

"Uh- yeah, sure, whatever," Wukong said, walking over to the pen. "Hey, uh, it's time to go."

"Go? But what about all these animals?" the clone whined, gesturing to the pen full of an assortment of small rodents.

"How did Wujing even let you do this?" Wukong murmured, absentmindedly reaching for the sugar glider in the clone's hands.

"***NO***," the clone growled, eyes flashing a dangerous pink.

"*Aaaaand* that's your cue," Wukong groused.

"Huh? Wait–"

Wukong flicked the clone's forehead and it was gone. Wukong blinked away the rush of memories that flooded into him, then reached into the pen and held a few rodents in a hand.

"All these little guys for a wedding?" Wukong asked.

Wujing shrugged, flinching as the action knocked his calculator off the counter.

.

"Wukong!" Sanzang cried, frantic as Wukong came running down the hall. He was holding a bookshelf against his office door, the distinct sound of something clawing at the wood loud in

the hall. "About time!"

"Would've been here sooner if you had a phone, you know?" Wukong sassed.

Sanzang flicked him in the nose for his troubles.

Wukong kicked away the bookshelf, immediately putting his staff up to parry the feral orange clone. The neon orange stripes were large and prominent around its eyes, making it look like a monster. Its pupils were nothing more than slits and drool dripped from its mouth in waterfalls.

"Um, hey?" Wukong gulped.

Soft crinkling grabbed the clone's attention, its pupils blown wide at the candy Sanzang held above Wukong's head. The monkey took the chance and slapped the clone in the forehead with his palm, causing it to disappear. Without the counterforce, Wukong fell backward with a pained grunt.

"Do I even want to know?" Sanzang asked, still panting and high strung.

"No," Wukong replied. "*Please* don't ask."

.

"AO LIE!"

"Oh, Wukong!" Ao Lie greeted, looking up from his laptop at his workbench. "*So* Nice of you to drop by! I hope you had a good rest while the little gremlin here was helping me in your place!"

Wukong blinked in confusion, looking around the workshop and finding it in pristine condition, which meant it was significantly neater than it usually was. Ao Lie's two newly built bikes were off to the side, both completed and painted with elaborate white dragons.

"Mystic monkey business?" Ao Lie chirped, taking a loud sip from a tall coffee cup. Now that Wukong looked a little closer, there were slight bags under his eyes and his clothes were stained with various paints.

Above Ao Lie was a tied up and gagged Wukong clone, jade tail swishing angrily and green eye make up akin to a drag queen's– with large, dramatic strokes in multiple shades and complete with glitter.

"Uh, haha, *yeah*."

"Oh, I haven't heard from Mihou in a while," Ao Lie said, setting down his laptop and revealing he'd be reading a webcomic on it (Wukong didn't look further than that; Ao Lie, Wujing, and even Bajie had freaky tastes in literature). "By any chance, did you leave one with him?"

"Uhh….."

.

"**WUKONG!**"

Wukong flinched at the angry call. It was just about sunset now, the night market was just about to open, but looking at the state of the street, he had a sinking feeling that it never closed. The road was littered with trash that should've been picked up by the stall owners when they closed or by the cleaners when they passed in the morning. The electric paper lanterns continued to shine while the oil ones had been put out from lack of fuel. The night market was effectively devoid of people. Except, of course, for Wukong's problem and the bystander near said problem.

"Are you SERIOUS right now?!" Mihou screeched, enraged. He was on the stage that belonged to the troupe that was supposed to be performing at the night market– the one Mihou wanted to audition for and the reason why he brought Wukong with him every night in the first place. They never got around to it because Wukong never wanted to perform, and Mihou didn't want to do it alone. He was tied to a chair with an open scriptbook by his feet.

At the foot of the stage, where the audience was supposed to be, was a lone Wukong clone. Its tail was a gradient of white, red, and black, and when it turned its attention to Wukong on the rooftops, its face was painted like a performer's in the same colors.

"Oh, hey, there, King!" the clone called, "here to watch the show?"

Wukong hopped down, trying to use the staff to catch his fall, but overshooting his momentum and slamming into the opposite building instead.

The clone laughed, "Stage fright? From who? There's no one here to watch!"

Wukong grumbled and made the rest of his way down, landing in front of the clone with a growing bump on his forehead. "Alright, time for bed," he said, reaching out to flick the clone in the forehead, but the clone grabbed his wrist and leaned back, just out of Wukong's reach.

"Already?" the clone whined, "But Mihou isn't even done practicing~"

"It's Macaque to you!" Mihou yelled.

The clone pouted in response. It flipped them around, holding Wukong by the biceps and facing him towards his brother. "C'mon, stay for the show, King!"

Wukong growled and used his tail to hit the clone under the chin, which caused the clone to let go with a yelp of pain. Wukong spun around and twirled his staff, then lunged for the clone.

The battle officially starts with a kick from Wukong, a simple one to test the waters, straight to the clone's head. The clone dodged, ducking down and rolling away, pupils turning into slits.

"So that's how it's gonna be?" it snarled. It positions into all fours, claws scratching the asphalt, leaving chalky white marks. "You asked for this, *your majesty.*"

The clone rushed at Wukong, its claws out and aimed at his side. Wukong yelled out in surprise, blocking the attack with his staff. The other was relentless, letting out enough animalistic noises to make anyone who understands a lick of monkey talk blush like a sailor.

It was hard to keep track of, it kept jumping up on the wires, making him watch for lanterns and falling glasses along with lashing tails and cheap kicks. He had to be creative, elongating his staff like a reverse whack-a-mole game, getting a lucky hit and sending the clone landing on the stage next to Macaque with a harsh *thud*.

"*Wukong!*" Mihou called, scooting his chair away from the clone, his shoes crunching on some glass from the lanterns, electric and gas, littered around him.

Seeing that Wukong was not attacking back, only parrying and weaving through punches and kicks, the clone snarled, claws digging on the wooden planks of the makeshift stage, tail smacking on the surface the same time he launched for Wukong again, sending chips of wood at Macaque.

Wukong sent an apologetic look his brother's way. He widened his stance as he swung his staff in a big horizontal arch, managing to hit his clone square in the face, sending it crashing through a dragon fruit stall.

"Is it dead?" Mihou asked, his voice, although whispered, rang across the empty market like a fallen metal pipe.

"Well… that was fun!" Wukong grinned, turning to Mihou, "Wanna get some—"

Wukong was hit on the side of the head by a dragon fruit. Turning toward the stall was his first mistake as he was met with a barrage of fruits being thrown in quick succession. He twirled his staff, blocking the fruit away from him despite most already hitting its mark from the dark pink stains on his clothes.

"Not *cool*, bud!" Wukong barely dodged a whole crate getting thrown at him, "How aren't you poofed yet?! That was a strong blow!"

Another crate, and this time Wukong smashed it in half, only to get a face full of tail.

He reacted quickly, grabbing it before it hit its mark and swung it back into another stall that reeked of fish.

"Okay, now it's dea—"

He was cut off by a loud groan from Macaque.

He was still on the stage, except now, coupled with the broken lanterns, had an entire wooden crate near the front, and smashed fruits all around him, all the while still miraculously clean and unharmed.

"Oh— whoops."

"Just get me out of here before you jinx us again!"

"Yeah, yeah, don't get your tail in a twist."

"*Watch out!*"

Wukong turned around, barely moving his head to the side, hissing as a butcher's knife grazed his cheek.

The clone was standing again, head down, arm still outstretched from when it threw the knife. Its shoulders shook, its crazed out laughter filling the silence of the market.

"You missed!" Wukong taunted.

It lifted its head, pupils looking more like pinpricks, with its smile unnaturally wide.

There was a loud screeching noise of metal against metal. He turned to look where the knife landed, seeing it embedded on the wood, fraying the rope holding the sacks filled with sand for when the curtains are drawn. It snapped, Mihou flinched as it landed on the wooden stage with a *thud, thud, thud*, seemingly far and near at the same time, a dangerous domino effect.

"*Oops.*"

Sparks flew as the rope, with its momentum from getting yanked with gravity, snagged an overhead stagelight, the little glittery stars of death landed on the wooden surface below, scorching it, forever staining it with the color of soot.

"Hey, King."

Wukong's heart stuttered for a moment.

"How do you like your brother…?"

Areas of the stage burst into flames, the fire burning patches where the old gas lantern's fuels spilled.

"... I think I like him *well done.*"

"*Mihou!*"

Wukong ran, clambering onto stage with his staff shrunken to be tucked behind his ear, needing two hands of his endeavor. He reached for his brother, tackling him away from another stagelight that came barreling down, the thing barely hanging on with wires.

The two tumbled off the stage, the ropes loosening and as the heavy painted wooden backdrop fell, sending smoke and ash throughout the small area, Macaque, with all the strength he could muster, threw the chair blindly at the still laughing clone.

Wukong squinted through the smoke as it slowly cleared.

The prone figure of his clone laid on the ground in a heap with the chair near it.

Wukong and Mihou panted for a moment, waiting for the clone to get up, but it never did. The moon was high in the sky now, but the various lights kept the street bright– the smothering stage being one of htem, more akin to how it was in the previous nights they had visited, albeit still devoid of its signature bustle.

"So, uh," Wukong started, "how was the audition?"

Mihou groaned and flopped back to the wooden floor, curled into his poncho. Still though, he was curled towards Wukong, so he can't be *that* mad.

=O=

"So that whole thing with the sky ripping apart last time was you?"

"Noooooooooo…. At least, not really."

"And the weather station?"

"No– well, actually, kinda?"

Sun Ni hummed thoughtfully, running her hand through Mihou's mane. They were seated at a bench Bajie kept behind the counter for either he or Mihou to use when manning the register, the curtains to the kitchen kept open so they could have a conversation while Wukong cleared it of fur. Mihou was asleep, exhausted after about a whole day of being held hostage under Wukong's clone. (Except Wukong couldn't exactly blame the clone; he'd gone berserk because Mihou apparently wasn't good enough for the judges and was rejected, which would also enrage Wukong. How *dare* they? Mihou was the *best* at what he did.)

"Should I be worried?" Sun Ni asked.

Wukong scoffed. "Don't worry about it! I have it all *under control*."

"Oh, you mean like this week?" Bajie asked, having just finished closing up the store.

"Yeah! I mean, Mr. Sanzang got the shortest end of the stick, but it's *all good!*"

Bajie looked into the kitchen, something settling inside him as he watched Wukong fuss over every nook and cranny to make sure it was hair free. For all his pomp, he was still a good kid with a heart of gold. And that was the thing, wasn't it? He was just a kid; he had room for growth still.

Bajie nearly called the feeling inside him warm until he saw *two* Wukongs in the kitchen.

"**ENOUGH WITH THE MYSTIC MONKEY BUSINESS!**"

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

"Welcome back, buddy!" the Harbinger greeted. He was right where Wukong left him a few days ago. The overhead sky had barely changed. "Everything turn out okay?"

"Yep! All good!" Wukong replied. "I have a question, though."

"Shoot."

"How'd you know that the clones would go rogue if I left him alone for too long?"

"Isn't it obvious? They're my powers, buddy, so of *course* I know how they work."

Wukong hummed. "*So*..... do *you* have any rogue clones?"

"..."

"..."

"We don't talk about the porty."

"The what–"

"HEY, DO YOU WANNA KNOW HOW TO DO A DROP KICK FROM A TREE?"

Chapter 5: Fetch Quest

Chapter Summary

> This was solidly not his problem, yet here he was, risking his life for a material object. His family wouldn’t care too much as long as he made it out alive, right? Ao Lie didn’t know the answer to that, but that’s the thing about family, right?
>
> People did inexplicable things for family.

"Do I *have* to?" Ao Lie whined, childish as ever, but the concerned look Bajie threw at him indicated that it only sounded that way.

"It's only for a few hours, xiaodi. Besides, it's not like you're actually doing anything important." Ao Lie didn’t know whether he preferred that his brother acknowledged his livelihood as a mechanic but looked down on it or back when his brother didn’t acknowledge his occupation at all.

"Aren't you worried that I'll burn down the house while you're gone?"

"Don't be such a baby. You only need to stick around long enough to pass a package over to Dashushu. You can’t keep him waiting."

"If it's so0 important, why don't you do it?"

"I have more important things to do!"

Ao Lie leveled a flat look at his reflection on the counter bell. In the background of his contorted reflection, Mihou and Wukong appeared just one burnt soup away from a brawl while they played a co-op cooking game on Ao Lie's switch. "You're just scared of Shushu."

His brother spluttered. "That is none of your business! Make yourself useful for once!"

Click .

Many people could argue that Ao Lie *was* being useful– usually being the preferred medium between his family and the best appraisers in town instead of a secretary, but was playing errand boy and messenger *really* the only thing he was useful for? Ao Lie knew his worth– he was smart and sociable, much like his siblings and parents, but what made him different? His choice of career? His friends? His unwillingness to pursue a partner despite the lack of ‘duties’?

Ao Lie had not fully pulled away the phone from his ear yet when Mihou, the nosy little gremlin, popped up underneath his arm to try to see the screen. Ao Lie raised his arm to keep

his phone away, but Mihou easily hopped onto the counter and flipped into the air to the table the three of them were passing time at, taking Ao Lie's phone with his tail on the way. His landing was wobbly and he would've fallen face first off the table if it weren't for Wukong putting a hand on his calf to stabilize him, but he remained standing nonetheless.

Ao Lie knew for a fact that Mihou couldn't do that yesterday-- his body was too sluggish to properly pull it off, meaning that between the last time Ao Lie had seen him-- 7PM last night-- and this morning, Wukong had done it and Mihou had replicated it out of spite. It was quite a talent-- similar to Wukong's ability to learn and understand worlds of material in impressively short amounts of time.

"'Xiongzhang'?" Mihou read. He proceeded to go through Ao Lie's phone like he hadn't just done so yesterday. "You visiting home?"

Ao Lie sighed, resigned to his privacy being torn to shreds. "Only for a bit," he said, snatching the phone from Mihou's grip. "Gotta get going, though. Brother awaits me. You two can keep the console for now."

" *Awww* , what?" Wukong groaned. "You're going back without *me* ?"

Ao Lie turned, raising a brow at Wukong. "Last I checked, you said that if you ever visited my house ever again, it'd be too soon."

"Uh, no?" Wukong scoffed. "I said, 'if I ever see Moang again, it'll be too soon.' Your brother isn't going to be there."

"What would you even do there?"

"This and that," Wukong shrugged, "I'll find something to keep me busy."

"How about me, can I come with?" Mihou asked. Before he was promptly thrown off from the table by a mop to the face.

"You're the one they straight up *banned* ," Bajie said. "Don't even *think* of going."

Mihou angrily grumbled, getting up from behind the table with the mop as support. "You see a company secret once and suddenly you're banned for life."

"That's espionage, Macaque, and it's illegal," Wukong said. Mihou slapped the mophead onto Wukong's forehead like a wig.

" *Rich* , coming from you, Mr Let's-Ink-Ao-Moang's-Entire-Room-And-Jumpscare-All-The-Staff," Mihou groused.

"Could you name things *any* more literally?" Wukong grumbled. Mihou took a swing at him with the mop, but he easily dodged.

"Don't you have work, though?" Ao Lie asked.

Wukong stiffened, "Er-, well–"

Mihou yanked his brother's collar, whispering something into Wukong's ear. Ao Lie and Bajie sighed as Wukong's expression turned determined at whatever mischief Mihou had cooked up. Ao Lie looked at Bajie, who gazed back with a concerned expression, but Ao Lie knew *exactly* what Mihou was making Wukong do. He gave Bajie a reassuring smile and waved off his concern.

Besides, it'd be better for him if he didn't go alone.

=O=

The drive to the Ao Estate was a long one. As opposed to the Sun Estate at the outskirts of Megapolis, Ao Lie's family home was in the center of the city. However, the location of Ni Ni Noodles meant that it was simply further away from the busiest part of the city. Ao Lie drove them there using his newly built bike, able to weave through traffic and drive past stoplights in the nick of time as well as take a few questionable shortcuts, but there was still a lot of time for Ao Lie to think.

Ao Lie didn't like home.

He moved away as soon as he could-- back when he was in college for mechanical engineering. He was younger than his classmates, having gone through primary and secondary education like skipping stones. People didn't like him for that, but Ao Lie didn't need friends. He was fine on his own, always had been, even in his own home, even when flanked on either side by siblings.

That of course, didn't mean that friends were unappreciated.

Back in his childhood, upper class families would swing by all the time for one reason or another. The Sun family was particularly close with the Ao family– with first mainly managing farming and the second, water supply and by proxy, irrigation technology. Ao Lie never knew what was going on in those meetings, though his brother definitely did. No, he was busier with the only child of the Sun family for his early childhood, though it was more her babysitting him while the adults talked and his own sister was more interested in doing her own thing than spending time with them. The Sun family proceeded to adopt two monkeys that Ao Lie had to take under his wing against his will, but Wukong and Mihou were good kids… until they grew up, at least. He's pretty sure that the staff still had nightmares of the two.

Then, one faithful day in Ao Lie's college years, Sanzang had approached Ao Lie on campus. One thing led to another, and in something that felt like it was within a blink of an eye, Ao Lie was surrounded by a family he far preferred to his biological one. Ao Lie's graduation happened soon after Bajie and Ni's honeymoon, and he officially moved out of his house and dorm to his own workshop soon after. It wasn't in the same area as Ni Ni Noodles, but its position as the third corner of the triangle, together with Wujing's clinic and Sanzang's office, practically made the noodle shop their go-to hangout spot. (Ao Lie wasn't planning to admit that the position was planned.)

"THIS IS *WAAAY* FASTER THAN A BUS!" Wukong called from behind him.

Ao Lie startled out of his thoughts, realizing that they could see the taller roofs of the Ao Estate now. He almost offered a detour to a convenience store or something, but decided against it.

The sooner he could get this done, the sooner he could leave.

.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been here outside of spring,” Wukong hummed, eyeing green hedges and grass, kept neat to perfection. “It’s so weird where there isn’t so much color.”

The estate was far larger than the Sun estate, with sprawling gardens and courtyards in addition to a large mansion, built with traditional Chinese architecture in mind. The wood material was birch, the roofs were made of jade-colored tiles, and the accents gold. Lanterns hung from almost everywhere, their exteriors traditional but their mechanisms electric, ready to light up the mansion at a moment’s notice. Ao Lie would know; he'd wired them himself.

Ao Lie’s family was more on the traditional side. Most big names in Megapolis– the Sun family included– favored technology, with high tech security and maintenance. Meanwhile, the Ao family hired personnel and staff to maintain their estate, going so far as to provide living quarters for the staff to sleep in should they wish.

“ *Sooo* ,” Wukong hummed as they walked through the wooden entrance hall, the large doors closing behind them, “What, exactly, are you going to be passing over to your uncle? Would anything bad happen if I, *sayyyyy* , took a peek?”

Ao Lie chuckled. “Busy yourself with something else, Wukong, I’ll take care of it.”

“‘Busy myself’?” Wukong asked incredulously. “Aren’t you worried that I’ll.. say…. prank the staff again?”

“I think this place could use a little excitement every once in a while, don't you?”

Wukong stopped walking, falling behind as Ao Lie continued. The wood beneath his shoes was nostalgic, the smell of stale sea salt incense wafting around the house. Ao Lie could almost imagine how many times he intentionally ruined his best clothes to avoid going to stuffy events, though his family always expected this and just gave him a new hanfu every time.

“Lie-ge.”

Ao Lie turned, looking at Wukong. Wukong never called him that, always *Ao Lie* this and *Ao Lie* that. He was respectful enough to use his surname whenever he called, but never respectful enough to address their age difference. There were exceptions, of course, and this appeared to be one of them.

“...You alright?” Wukong asked.

Ao Lie hummed, turning to a mirror hung on the wall. It was small, about the size you’d find on a vanity, with a simple marble frame. Ao Lie looked the same as he’d always known

himself– black hair that only stood out because of its length and dyed green bangs, pale skin and green eyes. He'll admit that his appearance wasn't average or 'normal', but when surrounded by family that shared the same features, it was hard for him to feel like he stood out.

Ao Lie smiled, tilting his head to the side in a tic he hadn't done since leaving.

"I will be."

=O=

"You know," Wukong said, "I never knew what was behind that door."

Ao Lie turned around, following Wukong's finger and seeing a large, wooden door. It wasn't much different from every other door on the way here– large, wooden, and intricately carved. Each door had a unique carving, and no one would be able to tell which room was behind each carving at first glance. This door in particular was that of a mythical ancestor of the family's– or at least said to be mythical.

"That's the treasury," Ao Lie said. Ao Lie would've opened the door to show Wukong the artifacts (the monkey did love a good story, after all, and artifacts made good props), but he didn't need to check to know that the door was locked shut. The only people who had the key to the treasury were his dad and his brother, and his father *loved* to spend hours talking to Ao Lie about every display just as much as Ao Lie loved hearing it. If Ao Lie had stayed longer, then perhaps he would've gotten his own. "And the carving is that of the family's ancestor, the great Jade Dragon."

The door was relatively new– a recreation of the old one because his father had renovated the entire mansion in order to up security and structural integrity, but for some reason, he'd decided to keep the glaring flaw in the carving of this door. The Jade Dragon towering behind a girl, along with her robes and the hilt of her blade, was intricately detailed, every scale, hair, and pattern, carved with scary precision. Jade pieces were even embedded strategically around the design. The girl herself, however, had no face to identify her with.

"The Jade Dragon?" Wukong murmured. "Like the one in the Harbinger's stories? *The* Jade Dragon General?" Wukong nearly lit up with excitement.

"Well, she's always just been a myth to the family," Ao Lie started. "But also my family doesn't really like the story of the Harbinger. They say that it's just fanfiction or something." That got Ao Lie thinking, though. If the Harbinger was real, then was it entirely impossible that the Jade Dragon– his ancestor– wasn't as mythical as he'd known?

" *Fanfiction* ?!" Wukong spluttered, and then proceeded to rant about how *yeah* , even though the Harbinger was in no legend besides his own, he was still an important historical figure

(not the argument he would've made if they had this conversation a few months earlier, but Ao Lie digressed).

Wukong's voice echoed throughout the halls, filling the empty spaces with a noise that Ao Lie wasn't quite used to. When they were younger, whenever they visited, Wukong and Mihou were both quiet. Even when they'd grown and started showing their true nature around the Ao estate, they were always quiet, speaking in whispers and muffling their laughter.

"Where are we going, anyway?" Wukong asked.

"To xiongzhang's study."

" *Eugh* . Do I have to come with?"

"Not at all. You're the one who wanted to go, remember?"

"It's not as fun without Mihou…" Wukong mumbled. "Anyway, I gotta… go use the restroom for a bit. Anywayhavefunseeyabye!"

Ao Lie watched as Wukong sprinted solidly in the opposite direction of the nearest toilet. Wukong knew the general layout of the estate too well to make a mistake like that. Ao Lie was willing to bet his hang glider that he knew what Wukong was actually here for. He sighed. "He could've just asked…"

=O=

"Do I even want to know?" Ao Lie murmured to himself, gently turning over the neatly wrapped package meant for his uncle. It was the size of a small textbook, so maybe that was it? A book? Why so bedazzled in sparkling jade wrap instead of safely boxed, though? He'd found it in his brother's study, sitting innocently on the table. He didn't know why Ao Moang didn't just have someone from the staff give it– it's not like they hadn't passed on more valuable things before.

Ao Lie left the study, heading for the kitchens. Maybe there were leftovers. Moang tended to leave a lot of those– the spoiled brat. Ao Lie should probably take it all home, for his troubles. Maybe they even have the sorbet that Sanzang loved so much.

His way back led him down the same hallway, back past the treasury.

One currently open.

"A-Die?" Ao Lie called, approaching the half open door. He hadn't gotten news that his father would be home, and the staff would've immediately come back to life from the dormancy from the lack of housemasters. Perhaps his father just came to pick something up? Without extra help, though? "A-Die, are you home?"

The treasury was dark, the only source of light coming from the hall. Unlike the rest of the house, the room was made of stone; its walls and floors made of thick concrete lined with ceramic tiles and a wooden exterior to match the rest of the house from the outside. It was supposed to be very secure, keeping all the valuable things his family had collected over the years. It was currently doing a very bad job at it.

Something was in here-- something with glowing pinprick eyes and a lot of green glowing others. He couldn't make out the shape-- there was a tail of some sort, perhaps horns?

There was, of course, also a sword. Because of all things they could have come to get, of course it was the legendary white jade sword of his ancestor.

"HEY!" Ao Lie cried. He tucked the present into the compartment he had on his back, made for his hang glider but he hadn't brought it. "What're you doing here?!"

The figure hissed and brandished the sword. The blade glowed green, instead of the white he'd known it to be.

"That doesn't belong to you," Ao Lie hissed. He had nothing to defend himself with-- even if anything else actually was magical here, it would take too long to open a case to get to anything.

"Hmmm..." the figure hummed, head tilting to the side. "Nope! I think it does, actually!" The blade of the sword exploded in green flames, the heat exploding outward in strong winds.

Ao Lie could see the thief, now. She wasn't quite human, with fangs and horns and tail, but her face was recognizably human-- sharp cheekbones and moon-lidded eyes bursting with the same flame as the sword. Her clothes were the trendy kind-- white and green that resembled his own palette, chic and practical and sporty albeit not something Ao Lie himself would wear. A demon, then? But how did she get through? The guards were demons too! In fact, Ao Lie was pretty sure that the only people in the estate that were human were him and his family. Ao Lie didn't recall anyone in the staff who looked like a dragon, though.

"Out of my way, stringbean!" she smirked.

Ao Lie looked back at the barely open door for a split second.

And then closed it.

=O=

Ao Lie’s favorite artifact among the ones they had was a white jade sword. The blade was intricately carved with sigils even the best historians couldn’t decipher. The hilt was made of marble with a carved dragon curled around the handle, large, bulky and impractical. The

pommel was shaped like a dragon head, with one of its eyes was a jade magatama and the other a ruby. Everything about it screamed decorative. It was meant to be an heirloom rather than a legacy, they supposed.

Ao Lie had always been told that while the Jade Dragon General was real, she was always a normal human with jade and dragon motifs. She was amazing in combat and while not the sharpest tool in the shed, was pretty infamous for making deadly ones for her army. Her story was one of tragedy, having lost her family when she was young, adopted into a new one, only to have that ripped away from her as well. If not for her, though, so many more lives would've been lost in unnecessary wars. The Jade Dragon wasn't actually related to his family by blood– instead she was the mentor of their actual ancestor, but he had adopted her into the family so that there will always be someone to mourn and remember her.

Then when Ao Lie had met Sanzang, he'd learned about the Jade Dragon General character in the Harbinger of Fate's story. There was no way he could've seen that as nonfiction at that point, but even though the characters and setting were different, even if now everything was underneath a magical filter, the Jade Dragon was still the same. She still lost her original family, was found by someone who loved her just as much, only to lose them as well. Ao Lie was never awfully invested in their ancestry like his sister, but even he'd noticed that there were a few skipped pages in that story.

The story behind the nameless sword was fascinating to historians, several of them coming by every year to get a look at it. Ao Lie was more interested in how cool it looked than anything else, though.

The transformation of the sword right before his eyes from white jade to green was also cool. The carved dragon that made it impractical to wield had merged into the hilt, creating what appeared to actually be a comfortable grip. The intruder was probably having the time of her life trying to kill him with it.

" *You're* the third son of Ao Run?" she mocked, taking another swing. This was almost like a game to her, tearing apart pedestal after pedestal. He was probably only alive for so long because she wasn't actually putting in a serious effort. "HA! Same old, same old."

Ao Lie growled. He circled the room another time, so that the intruder's back was to the door and his was to the empty display case. Several shards of all sorts of materials crunched under his boots. It was still fairly dark, and his eyes had only adjusted so well. His familiarity of the place was the only thing he had going for him, barely aided by the light the intruder casted.

"Going somewhere?" she asked, swinging her sword in his direction. He was too far from the blade for it to actually be a threat, but then the tip glowed green and he barely a second to trip over something and fall to his chin before a *laser* shot out of the blade and drilled a deep hole into the wall.

"Lasers?" Ao Lie murmured in shock. "It has *lasers??* "

"Pretty neat, right?" the intruder said. "It's something new I picked up a few years ago. Haven't gotten the chance to test it yet."

Ao Lie growled again. He rolled into a crouch and deployed his rocket skates. He'll just apologize for the door later.

He rushed forward, propelled by his shoes, past the intruder. On the way, he grabbed the sword by the handle, only barely getting his hand underneath the guard. He used the heavy blade to break through the door which he'd previously locked to keep the intruder inside, and skated down the hall.

"HEY! GET BACK HERE!" the intruder called, running after Ao Lie.

"How'd she even get past security?" Ao Lie squeaked to himself.

He needed to find Wukong. He didn't know how powerful the intruder was, but he was the only one in the whole building who could take a hit and be okay (probably, hopefully– Ao Lie never really tested the invincibility Wukong claimed he had). Ao Lie took a sharp turn around the corner, towards the kitchen, because knowing what Wukong was here for, he was definitely in there. Ao Lie looked back, expecting to see the intruder crash into the decorations at the intersections. Instead, in a flash of lightning, the intruder was using the wall of the intersection as a springboard and as in front of him in another flash.

Ao Lie yelped in shock, trying to run faster, but in only a few more jumps against the floor, the intruder was far ahead of him. Ao Lie skid to a halt, going so far as to dig the sword into the floor to keep as much distance between them as possible.

"Not bad," the intruder hummed. In the light, her hair was long and black, two braids with green running through them framing her face. Her horns were gone, replaced with two small pigtails on the top of her head, a green belt hanging just above where her tail was earlier. "Not good enough, though."

She rushed forward, and time slowed for Ao Lie. Sparks danced around them, the intruder midair with her demonic features back in full swing, the jade scales around her eyes not at all helping Ao Lie sleep tonight. Her hand was thrust forward, toward the sword. Ao Lie should just give it to her, in all honesty. Yes, it was a priceless artifact, but knowing how much influence his family had over Megapolis, they'd track it before she'd be able to get it out. Even if they didn't, what did Ao Lie care?

This family had done nothing but bring him to the world and didn't take the responsibility to properly care for him. He was closer to his nannies than he was with either of siblings or parents, and "close" was a loose term because even the nannies kept their distance from him. This was solidly *not* his problem, yet here he was, risking his life for a material object. His family wouldn't care too much as long as he made it out alive, right? Ao Lie didn't know the answer to that, but that's the thing about family, right?

People did inexplicable things for family.

Ao Lie felt something cold slither up his arm– something prickly that dug into his skin as it crawled underneath his sleeve. The sword felt lighter, all of a sudden, but the intruder already had it within arm's reach.

Then, somehow, faster than Ao Lie could comprehend, flames erupted from *his* body.

The intruder hissed and leapt back, mission failed. Ao Lie panted, hyper aware of the flames encasing his body, but unsure how to proceed. His ponytail violently whipped behind him as the hair he hadn't been bothered to tie back neatly slapped him in the face and poked him in the eye. Ao Lie wasn't sure how it looked at that moment, but he guessed that he was intimidating enough to freeze the intruder in her place. No– freeze wasn't right–

She stood in what Ao Lie could dare call *awe* .

Not knowing what else to do, Ao Lie turned heel, booking it down the hallway on his skates. The flames followed after him, after his movement rather than the sword. He wasn't aware what to think of it, but he didn't have to think about it long because in the next second the blade was gone from his grasp.

"Neat trick!" the intruder said, appearing in another flash of lightning in front of Ao Lie. Ao Lie skid to a stop, the flames evaporating into nothingness. "Hm, too bad that that's all you can do. I'll give you an A for effort, though! See you around, stringbean!"

It wasn't raining, but with the clap of thunder, the intruder was gone.

=O=

Ao Lie found Wukong in the kitchen, hurriedly searching for a certain treat that they couldn't get anywhere else. At least, not without the Sun family's help, but even the best employees of the company hadn't been able to find the confectioner for Mihou's favorite snack. Wukong didn't seem to notice him, digging through a particularly deep cupboard beside the fridge, his feet swinging back and forth as they lost the surface he was standing on in an attempt to crawl deeper into the cabinet.

Ao Lie walked over, pulling open the drawer directly underneath Wukong. It was large and probably would've been more practical as a double shelved cupboard rather than a two layer drawer, but the sugar and syrup jars told Ao Lie that it was the one he was looking for. He reached into the drawer, hand against the inside of the door as he searched for a small nook he knew would be there. He pushed away the bottom of the drawer, revealing another, secret drawer– one holding boxes of wagashi treats, all unopened. Ao Lie pulled out a few and tucked them on his forearm before sliding back the false bottom and closing the drawer.

Ao Lie cleared his throat. "Looking for these, Wukong?"

Wukong leaned back from the cupboard, startling at Ao Lie's presence, then immediately lighting up upon seeing the treats he had on hand.

"We'd you find them?" he asked excitedly, hopping down onto the floor and opening his arms to accept the boxes.

“Ao family secret.”

“You’re no fun.”

None of the Ao siblings were particularly fond of foreign treats, but his brother had a small habit of stress cooking, and pounding mochi made for good stress relief. Packing them in boxes he’d made hid the fact that he’d made them himself, protecting his pride from his parents. What kind of sibling would Ao Lie be if he didn’t take advantage of his brother’s perceived weakness while also helping him hide said perception?

“Did you get what you needed?” Wukong asked.

“Yep! Just need to wait for uncle to come pick it up.” Not that Ao Lie knew what siad uncle even looked like, come to think of it. Ao Lie had never met Dashushu, only having heard of him from his family members. They never seemed to like him, which was probably why his brother had sent Ao Lie instead of doing it himself.

“When’s he coming?”

Ao Lie shrugged.

He and Wukong then left the kitchen, making their way back to the entrance. As they were walking back, Wukong took a glance into the hallway that would eventually lead to Ao Moang’s study, and with that, the treasury. He saw the splintered door and streaks scorched on the wood that weren’t there fifteen minutes ago, but Ao Lie didn’t say anything– didn’t even look in its direction. Wukong shrugged, opting to not question it.

“Hey, by the way, how long has it been since you dyed your hair?” Wukong asked.

Ao Lie hummed, tilting his head to the side. “I dunno, probably a month or two? I start off with a dark green so that it still looks good when… it… fades?” Ao Lie slowed, looking at his reflection in the mirror from earlier. For a moment, there was someone else– an older man with long white hair and oversized sleeves that Ao Lie only wore in protest, then he was gone and it was Ao Lie again.

Ao Lie whose hair underneath the ponytail was currently streaked white.

That was *not there* a moment ago.

“Uh, it’s from the stress?” he tried.

Wukong squinted suspiciously, but couldn’t come up with a better reason for the sudden aging of his friend.

=O=

Ao Guang was an old man with long, grayed hair, except it was vaguely pink, as if he dyed it at one point and it never completely washed out, same with the beard. He was overdressed in an expensive tuxedo but no chauffeur or car to show for it. Ao Lie wasn't going to question anything, though.

"You must be Ao Lie. It's a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance," Ao Guang said, bowing.

"The pleasure is all mine, Dashushu," Ao Lie replied, returning the gesture. Wukong watched from where they'd been sitting on a garden bench while waiting for Ao Lie's uncle. "It's quite a surprise that I've never run into you before despite you coming by so often!" *As if Ao Lie wasn't actively avoiding home.*

Ao Guang chuckled. "It's a surprise to me as well. Perhaps I should drop by more frequently, then, if that's the case."

"Oh, don't bother yourself with lil' old me; I've also got my own things to do. Oh, speaking of, xiongzhang wanted me to give this to you." Ao Lie reached behind him and pulled out the package, unscathed. He handed it to Ao Guang, who accepted it gratefully. Their fingers brushed for a moment, and whether it was intentional or not didn't matter to Ao Lie, not when a vision flashed before his eyes– a scene of ashes and misery. In the center of it all– *her* , the intruder.

Ao Lie gasped, pulling away. Ao Guang startled as well, leaning back, the package securely in his hands. Ao Lie, however, didn't stop there. He burst into flames, charring the weeds that grew between the stone tiles of the entrance path.

"Ao Lie!" Wukong called, standing up, but by then the flame had died.

Ao Lie panted, patting himself all over to check that he was still there. Ao Guang stared in shock, shock that then turned to anger.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

Ao Lie chuckled. "A little party trick I learned, is all! Anyway, I have to get going. Call xiongzhang if you need anything!" He ushered Wukong out of the estate, quickly leaving Ao Guang behind.

Wukong would ask questions, searching for answers Ao Lie didn't have, but that was for later. Right now, he needed a walk.

Meanwhile, Ao Guang stood in shock in the garden of the Ao estate. He looked at the hand that had brushed against Ao Lie's, glaring as if it would tell him the secrets to the universe.

Glaring as if that would give him an answer as to why Ao Lie had seen a vision of the past.

Chapter 6: Part Timer

Chapter Summary

> "How adorable," the voice mocked. "Did you really think that you were capable of helping him in any way if this is how you react to an illusion? Tsk tsk, it's always people like you who only make things worse than they already are.
>
> "Always thinking that you can make things better, but when it actually comes down to it, you're nothing more than a burden."

"Wukong's supposed to be the one doing this," Bajie groaned. "Why are *you* taking his job?"

Mihou turned up his nose, snatching the bags of take out from Bajie. "That's for me to know and for you to not."

Bajie snorted, rolling his eyes. "Of *course* the Six-Eared Macaque would refuse to share his own secret even when he's so keen to hand out others' like candy."

Mihou stuck his tongue out in retaliation.

It was a well established fact that Mihou was not made for social interaction. Growing up, he had never meshed well with his peers with a few exceptions he can count on one hand, and all of them involved Wukong in some way. However, he thought that deliveries would be easier. He only had to knock on the door and hand over the food, right? Maybe some basic customer service he can fake to a degree.

Wukong, as per usual, just had to make things harder for him.

"Aw, is Wukong sick? You must be his brother! He tells me lots about you."

"Where's the orange one? Is he finally taking a break? Poor boy needs to learn how to take time for himself, tsk."

"Wukong-gege isn't here today? Can you play with me instead?"

Wukong isn't doing his job today and he's still *making things harder for me!* Macaque sneered, mentally, of course, because it would be rude to hurt the old customer's feelings– he was just making sure that everything was alright with the usual delivery boy. Macaque wished that he wasn't touching his face in a resolve to make sure that the one in front of him wasn't Wukong playing a prank on his 'poor old heart'.

Macaque let out a sigh of relief as he sat back in the safety of the tuktuk. The buildings were too tall to be able to get a clear view of the horizon, but it was getting dark and the sunlight was turning orange and scarce. The streetlights weren't on yet, but it wouldn't be long until they did. There were only a couple of deliveries left for the day. Normally, Wukong would keep doing deliveries until an hour before closing, but Bajie had apparently decided to close up early for the day, and Mihou was well aware of the reason being Ao Lie and the comfort he would need after a visiting his family– the old man didn't have to say anything about it. Mihou, of all people, would know.

"Where to next…" Mihou mused. There was a small meow at the foot of the bike.

There was a black tabby at the entrance of an alley. It meowed again, louder this time, as if deciding that politeness was overrated.

"Um… need something, little guy?"

The cat wandered deeper into the alley. From this angle, Mihou noticed something…odd about the cat. It was hard to tell from under the dark, unlit shadows of the evening, but there was something about the cat that wasn't quite right. Mihou debated leaving for a moment, turning on the engine of the tuktuk, but then that just got the cat barreling back at him at meowing at full volume.

Mihou could leave it. No one would know. Except he would, and he wasn't *heartless.*

With a defeated sigh, Mihou turned off the engine and hopped off to follow the cat.

"This is how I die," Mihou murmured, turning on his phone torch. "Led to a murder alley by the cat."

When he rounded the corner, he was surprised to find a small shelter– one made of trash that was probably found in the dumpster next to it. The shelter was made from a hollowed out air conditioning unit, with the exhaust fan detached to act as an entrance and a decrepit flatscreen propped against the vented side to shield it from the weather. Just outside were two food bowls, clearly having seen better days but not quite out of use yet.

The cat meowed again, taking a seat beside the bowls.

With better lighting, Macaque could tell that despite it being an alley cat, it was actually clear of debris and grime; looking clean and more like a domesticated feline than an alley stray. The cat was missing an eye, though– probably from a fight with the way it was crusted over with something brown. One of its ears also had a little extra growth, though even in the bright light, Mihou couldn't tell what it was for sure.

"Uh, I don't have any food on me…"

The cat just meowed again, oblivious to his shortcoming.

Mihou turned back to the bowls, finding both to be filthy with food remains the cat couldn't get. "Is this how you get food? By kidnapping people?"

The cat gave a coo at that. Implying that it saw Mihou as a kitten.

Mihou.

Kitten.

"...suddenly I don't want to help you anymore," Mihou huffed. He turned, walking out of the alley. The cat's meow sounded indignant as Mihou left and started up the tuktuk, driving away.

Mihou wouldn't leave the cat hungry, of course, but he didn't have anything on him. He was definitely going to circle back when he was done.

"What happened to Wukong?" the customer asked.

"He's on break," Macaque replied through gritted teeth. He then bowed and turned to leave. That was the second to last delivery of the day, and he was *exhausted* . This was with *cut* hours on a half day service. Mihou doesn't get how his brother could go twice as long as he did and then some, a lot of times on close calls, too, with how often he slacked in between deliveries.

Mihou tacked in the last location for the delivery as he approached the tuktuk. The sun was fully down now, but it didn't look like it with how light the sky was with heavy smoke reflecting the dozens of lights below. The streetlights were on, but they barely mattered among rows and rows of neon signs and billboards. They were fickle like that– absent when they were needed most and uselessly present when they weren't needed at all. Mihou settled into the tuktuk, ready to head to the last location, when he caught sight of a poster for a fortune cat ad on the side of a post.

" *Right,* " he groaned, "the cat."

As if summoned, said cat popped from the bag of deliveries behind him with a curious purr.

"I've only known you for a day and you're already ruining it."

The cat meowed in response.

And then Mihou realized that the black tabby was *in the tuktuk with him* .

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!" he yelled, voice lost to the commotion of the night time streets. He spun around in the driver's seat looking into the sole eye of the animal,

which didn't know any better, simply licking its paw in innocence.

Mihou scrambled further back, flashing his phone screen at the bag. Thankfully the tabby hadn't dirtied it or eaten the last order, but the fact that it was there at *all* was a problem.

"Why are you like this?" Mihou accused, turning his phone directly at the cat, which swatted at his face for his troubles. Mihou growled. "You know what? Fine. To Wujing's we go. I'm sure he'll be *thrilled* to have another stray." Plus, his clinic was on the way to the last customer anyway. If he wasn't home, a fifteen minute walk to his apartment wasn't even a five minute drive on a vehicle.

=O=

The streets were different at night, not quite looking the same as they did in the day. Different things lit up at night, like hair salons turning into bars with a change in what part of the sign lights up, or what streets were shut down for nighttime construction and which ones opened because the crew had left. That's the excuse he was going to tell everyone when he got back.

"Where even are we?" Mihou murmured, holding his phone up higher, as if an additional signal was going to tell him where they actually are and not that they were at Wujing's clinic. Unless Wujing had abandoned his clinic and the building had somehow become completely dilapidated in the few days since Mihou was here last, on top of someone leaving a fog machine, then Mihou was six hundred percent sure that he was in the wrong place. "I don't suppose you'd know?"

The cat hopped up from behind him, perching its front paws against his shoulder. It meowed loudly, ever helpful.

"Right. We're turning back."

Mihou reached to restart the engine, but something sounded from inside the building. He paused, resting the key in his hand but not turning it just yet. Then, the sound came again, almost like a whisper.

Mihou turned his phone flashlight, pointing it into the glassless window of the abandoned apartment. "...Hello?"

The whispers got louder, as if responding to him. It was quiet, just under the sound of the city noise, but he could hear them. They were almost too loud despite his inability to understand any of it.

This was where he turned back for real. This was where he backed the tuktuk out of the empty and dark street he'd driven himself into and manually asked for directions despite the social interaction it would require. He would bring the cat back home and let it stay for the night before bringing it to Wujing's in the morning, or asking Wukong to do it. This was where the story of when he had found himself in the second murder alley of the night, ends.

" *Heyyy,* kitty," Mihou said softly with a nervous chuckle, starting up the engine and starting to make motions to get them out. "I hope you don't mind staying with me for the night–"

“ ***XIAODI!*** ”

Mihou froze, fur puffing up at the clear echo of his brother’s voice. It couldn’t have been, right?

“...Wukong?” Mihou called tentatively, almost like a whimper.

“MIHOU!”

That was him, undoubtedly. Mihou would know the sound of his brother’s voice anywhere. What was he doing here, though? Wasn’t he with Ao Lie? Who was Mihou kidding– of *course* Wukong would be exactly the kind of person to find himself in this exact kind of horror movie scenario.

“I’m going to kill him when I find him,” Mihou growled. He shook off the cat and killed the engine. He got off the tuktuk, unhappy with how his knees buckled, but trekked on.

The door was locked, but the window was free entrance. It wasn’t even boarded and was clear of glass. Upon stepping inside, Mihou was surprised to find that the building hadn’t been used at all. Instead, it was like a construction project left to rot. There were piles of wooden planks and sacks of concrete covered by tarp, though the wood was rotting and something was growing in the corners of the sacks. Various construction equipment was put to the side, but the dust that covered them was so thick that it was almost like they had a tarp of their own.

Despite the unfinished state of the building, it had a basement. The fog was notably thicker there, and was also the source of the whispers, along with Wukong’s cries. Mihou knew that he wouldn’t like what he found there.

The cat was looking to get killed, though, seeing as it jumped through the window *and made a beeline to the basement* .

“H-hey! Wait!”

Mihou ran after the cat, following it as it forwent the stairs completely and instead jumped straight down. Mihou took the stairs down, like a normal person, and kicked up tons of dust while he was at it. It itched at his eyes and nose, but he saw the faint shadow of the feline disappear further down. Why there was light in the basement was beyond Mihou, but the whispers were deafening. Now, drowning out the sounds of the city outside, Wukong’s voice nearly lost in the crescendo.

“You two are going to be the death of me,” Mihou murmured, coughing as he inhaled dust but quickly scrambling downward.

At the end of the staircase was an elevator, something clearly made for construction. It was metal, dented in concerning places, and completely devoid of walls, though it was far enough from the jagged construction of the foundation around it for scraping to not be a problem. The light was further down the rickety shaft, threatening to flash Mihou in the eye if he

looked at it directly. He could tell that it was supposed to be blue, but why? A forgotten emergency light, maybe?

The faintest wisp of his brother's voice reminded him why it might be on to begin with.

Mihou gulped, steeling his nerves. He made his way to the elevator, upset with the knowledge that it rocked with the slightest weight, and that the lever was outside the shaft. As he was about to figure out the balancing act between him pulling it and staying in the shaft, the tabby pulled the lever.

The elevator was already breaking so many safety rules as is, so Mihou *really* shouldn't have been surprised when it *dropped* instead of lowered the second the lever was pulled. Something thunked on the roof, but Mihou wasn't too focused on that as he held onto one of the four posts– the only thing that could act as support in the lift– for dear life. He probably screamed, and that definitely got the whispers to quiet down because when the lift suddenly came to a stop, creating a Mihou-shaped dent on the ceiling, and then on the floor as he fell back down, it was completely silent. It was as if the whispers were also in shock with the elevator's violence, or perhaps Mihou just fainted.

Maybe it was both, because he awoke to the cat pawing at his face. It was meowing at him like he was a kitten again, which was never going to stop getting on his nerves, which were too shot to do anything other than quietly growl in response. The cat took that as reply enough, though, because it backed off and started making its way through the tunnel they'd found themselves in.

The light was so much brighter here, with crystals lining the stone walls and refracting the eerie blue light throughout the space. The ceiling was high, but also covered with crystals, looking like the night sky. It wasn't as pretty as a real one, but Mihou would admit that it was close. It was peaceful, almost. The temperature was cool but not freezing, the refractions casting sparkles on every surface, and on top of it all, it was quiet. The only things Mihou could hear were his breathing and the cat's footsteps as it walked through the tunnel.

Before the cat would disappear around the corner, Mihou scrambled up, realizing that he'd dropped his phone at some point. He scanned the lift in search of it, even peering over the edge of the floor, but only finding solid rock decorated with more crystals less than a foot underneath him. The cat meowed, calling for Mihou, but he ignored it in favor of finding his phone, but it meowed again and Mihou still hadn't found anything, so he got up and followed after it. When Mihou reached the tabby, it hopped onto his shoulders, and he walked them both through the tunnel.

The path was practically straight, but the peaceful feeling he had when he first entered didn't last. He noted that air was especially stale; suspended, like time had stopped. There was a gradual drop in temperature that had Mihou exhaling clouds. The cat seemed unbothered, except for the rhythmic slapping of its tail across Mihou's back, not that Mihou could blame it, his own tail swishing from side to side nervously.

At the end of the tunnel was a cave, and in the center of it all was a casket, made of ivory and intricately decorated, yet wrapped in chains. Fog leaked weakly from where the lid met the casket. Mihou wasn't quite out of the tunnel yet, but he didn't see Wukong anywhere, or Ao Lie for that matter. Did they get separated? Most likely, seeing as he'd only heard Wukong.

Mihou turned heel, unsure of what he was going to do next, but he *definitely* wasn't going to go in there. If Wukong's voice was heard from all the way up there, and there was nothing down here, then he must've missed something at some point, right?

"MIHOU, DON'T LEAVE ME!"

Mihou whipped back around, heart hammering in his chest. "Wukong?!" he called, running into the room.

When he looked around, however, it was still as empty as it was a moment ago, but the longer he stayed, the thicker the fog from the casket became. It quickly covered the floor like a thick carpet, the cat on his shoulder going stiff and hissing threateningly at it. Mihou spun around, fanning away the fog with his hands, but it was dense as it was cold, leaving him shivering.

"And what do we have here?" a voice whispered, clearer than any other he had heard tonight.

Mihou scanned the room, finding no one else there. It was just him, the cat…

And the casket.

"Aren't you a rather pathetic one?"

"Who's there?!"

"Just an old man here to impart some words of wisdom," the voice chuckled. " *What's a coward like you doing here?"*

"That's none of your business!" Mihou growled.

"Is it? You walk into my *room, calling for someone you seem to care an awful lot about, and yet* you're *the one who gets to be rude?"*

The fog was thicker, taller, crawling up to Mihou's waist and further dropping the room's temperature. The cat had perched onto Mihou's head, though it barely provided any warmth of its own either. "If it bothers you so much, then I'll leave, it's not like he's here anyway."

"Who? Him *?"*

"XIAODI!"

Mihou froze as a foggy figure of Wukong formed and reached towards him. It lacked a face, but the fear in his voice was something that haunted Mihou in his nightmares. Mihou's breathing picked up, his body locking up from the sight.

“How adorable, ” the voice mocked. *“Did you really think that you were capable of helping him in any way if* this *is how you react to an* illusion? *Tsk tsk, it’s always people like you who only make things worse than they already are.*

“Always thinking that you can make things better, but when it actually comes down to it, you’re nothing more than a ***burden*** *.* ”

Mihou gasped, covering his ears and crouching down, disappearing into the thick clouds below. The cat yelped, scrambling to stay above as Mihou sank until there was nothing left of either of them above the fog. “It’s not real, it’s just a nightmare,” Mihou murmured.

“We both know that it’s only a matter of time until it becomes reality.

“Look at where he is now; a powerful being that can fight against– oh, what’s this? The *Golden-Winged Peng?! HA! And you thought that you’d be able to overcome whatever it is that caused him to ask for help? What a joke!”*

Mihou inhaled, trying to calm himself down, but only ended up inhaling a lungful of freezing fog and coughing. He quickly stood back up, seeking solace, but was only met with more fog. Something swirled underneath his chin, tilting it up. He opened his eyes and was met with a vaguely humanoid figure protruding from the fog. Everything about it was uncertain, from the length of its hair to what clothes it wore, but its unsettling cheshire grin remained constant.

“However… I’m willing to help fix that problem.”

The figure directed his face back to where the figure of Wukong was. This time, it had an expression, as if it had been lifted from his nightmares and pasted into real life, only a step away from the real thing.

“You can stop this. All you have to do is do little ol’ me a favor.”

Mihou’s face was jerked to the side by something holding his face in its cold, cold hands, to a better view of the casket, still clearly seen among all the fog and glowing ominously. *“Get me out, and I’ll give you the ability to write off anything that poses even the* slightest *threat to your brother.*

“You’ll have the power to rewrite fate. The only thing that can stand in your way would be the Scripture himself! Can you imagine that? A power that not even the Jade Emperor can oppose?

“Alas,” the voice concluded, releasing Mihou. *“I’m sure your pathetic little brain doesn’t completely understand what I’m offering.”* The fog receded rapidly, returning to the casket. *“I’m not worried, though.*

“ ***You’ll be back.*** *”*

With a sinister laugh, the rest of the fog, with all its illusions, was reabsorbed into the casket. Across the room, a portal appeared, or at least, Mihou was pretty sure it was a portal. Given

what else he knew, he wasn't surprised. He was still in shock from the whole event, though, his breathing stuttered and joints locked. His legs were shaking so hard that he wasn't sure how he was even standing still.

There was no way that was real, right?

The cat, Mihou belatedly realized, was wrapping itself around his legs, meowing for his attention. He looked down, fully expecting fog to be there still, only to be greeted with a clear floor and a concerned cat. The room was bright enough that for the first time, Mihou noticed that the extra growth around the cat's ear was an extra appendage.

Mihou slowly lowered himself to get a closer look, but ended up falling forward instead. The cat meowed in alarm, but he was able to break his fall with his hands– at least he was still functional enough for *that* . He rolled over onto his back, where the tabby immediately crowded against his face and he had to gently push it away. He took the opportunity to observe it. The cat's left ear was nicked, leaving only half of the original appendage. Meanwhile, behind *both* ears--not just the one– were an extra set of ears, about half the size of the primary ears and angled slightly lower, leaving them unscathed from whatever had gotten the cat's original ear. Mihou didn't know if they were functional, but they appeared to be attached to the root of the primary ears. How strange.

Then, something sounded from the portal. It was muffled and echoey at the same time. The voice was familiar; Mihou could never forget the voice of Peng, but he couldn't understand what he was saying. The cat had taken notice as well, and immediately turned tail– and boy does Mihou wish that this was not how he had found out that the cat was a female, numb and in shock in an underground after having just had a free trial of his dreamscape– to trot up to the portal.

"H-hey…" Mihou called softly. "Can you like, *not,* for two seconds?"

The tabby looked back at him for a moment before leaping through the portal like it had better things to do than stay alive.

"Must be nice having nine lives," Mihou murmured grumpily.

Mihou did not have nine lives, but he did have an excessively bleeding heart, and he wasn't just going to *leave* a poor animal to the Brotherhood, singular life be damned.

It's always people like you who only make things worse than they already are.

Mihou got up, ignoring the lingering whispers in his head and followed after the cat.

=O=

The portal had spat him out behind a throne. He circled it, craning his neck up as the stone far towered over him, appearing as if it was supposed to be taller, going by the diagonal break in

through the backrest. On its right side, opposite of the side Mihou was on, was a thick cushion laden in dust.

The room itself was another cave system, but this one covered with murals Mihou couldn't quite make out. Besides the aforementioned seat, which was elevated by more stairs than Mihou wouldn't have been happy to climb once, much less on a daily basis, the room was bare save for lines of bookshelves, majority in poor condition. There weren't any light sources he could see other than the portal he'd come through, but the room was still dimly lit enough by something he couldn't pinpoint that he could see everything clearly, including the tabby that had found itself on top of the only undamaged bookshelf right beside the doors.

Mihou sighed in relief, making his way across the long hall. Mihou looked around, absently noting the knicknacks displayed on the shelf. None of them caught his eye, except maybe a pair of golden skates that were no doubt magical and could potentially send Mihou to his death. Wukong would probably have no qualms about taking them, though.

Mihou made his way up the shelf, surprised at finding no risk of it toppling despite its age. The top was just as dusty as the rest of it, though it was stacked with thick books like the person who put them there couldn't be bothered to organize them properly. In between stacks, Mihou spotted the cat playing with some length of red ribbon, tangled in the scarlet length like a ruby mummy.

" *Really?* " Mihou asked incredulously. "You leave me for *this?* "

The tabby froze, looking at Mihou with wide eyes, before continuing its game as if she didn't see Mihou at all.

Mihou rolled his eyes, reaching for the cat to usher her down. Just then, voices echoed from outside. Mihou instantly scrambled to the top of the shelf and behind two tall piles of books, just enough to cover him if he slouched. He pulled a few more piles closer, pulling the cat onto his lap. In this position, his right side and back were pressed against the wall while his left side was just barely touching the books, his front only barely hidden by a short, empty basket; probably the one the cat had found the ribbon in. Mihou knew that if anyone took in the room from the throne's position, they would clearly see Mihou, but with no other option, Mihou was left to hope and pray that everything would turn out all right.

The stone doors slid open with a quake, rattling the trinkets in the shelf and leaving Mihou trembling. The cat had stopped moving as well, thankfully enough.

There was an appreciative whistle. "For an abandoned lair, it still looks good, I'll give it that." Peng.

"Albeit barren," someone added. Mihou wasn't sure who.

" *This* is the lair of the legendary Demon Bone Spirit General?" someone else asked. Mihou felt that one in his chest, Azure, most likely? "It's… quaint."

Peng laughed loudly. "It was much grander way back when. It's not quite the same without all the curtains, you know?" Peng walked forward until Mihou could just barely see them

past the piles of books. “Thankfully the only threat in *this* room was the General himself and his lady. I can’t imagine what it would be like if this room was as armed as the ones on the way here.”

The only member of the party Mihou hadn’t identified, meaning it was probably Yellowtusk, sighed. “And yet, the fact that we haven’t been attacked yet implies that neither of them were here at all.”

“Maybe we just need to wait a bit,” Peng suggested. The entire Brotherhood moved forward, giving Mihou the unfortunate realization that they wouldn’t even need legendary abilities to beat him to a pulp. Peng, he’d probably be able to get away from in a fair fight, but the other two? Wukong failed to mention that the Brotherhood was *terrifying* even if they weren’t celestial beings. Mihou didn’t know why he’s taking notes from someone who wasn’t afraid of the demons who had already killed him, though. “It seems like someone’s been here recently.”

“You said that the General had been locked away,” Azure said, astonished.

“Ah, yes, the *General* ,” Peng chuckled.

“The fate of the General’s Lady has been unknown for centuries, but given the fact that there’s proof that someone with an eerily similar magical signature was here not too long ago… it is safe to say that she is still actively operating to the General’s ideals,” Yellowtusk explained.

The casket, Mihou realized. The fog was probably magical, right? Did it stick to him? Not unlikely. On second thought, he *hoped* that it was him and not someone as powerful as the Brotherhood because he can barely live in the same world as three– four now that there was a ghost preying on his inability– celestial demons, what more if the wife of said ghost was up and kicking???

“How can you be so sure that she’ll be on our side? Her beliefs may not be fully aligned with the General’s,” Azure asked.

“Well, we do have *this,* ” Peng snickered, pulling out a key.

Get me out, and I’ll give you the ability to write off anything that poses even the slightest *threat to your brother.*

Mihou inhaled sharply, followed by his hand slapping itself over his mouth in case he breathed too loudly. Luckily, the Brotherhood didn’t seem to notice, though they were definitely at a place where they would definitely be able to see him if they turned around.

"Were we not going to free the General himself?" Azure asked. "Isn't that why we came all this way?"

"No one knows where the casket is. The off-chance that it would be here is smaller than the possibility of us winning a fight against the Scripture as we are now. No, we were just here to see if there would be anything else we'd be able to hold over her head."

"So you know where she is?"

Peng nodded at Yellowtusk, before they seemed to notice something behind the throne. Mihou knew *exactly* what they saw back there; he had nowhere to run. He almost blamed the cat for his predicament, but the poor girl was tense as well.

"She's everywhere all at once, Azure," Yellowtusk explained. "She plays the world as if it's her personal chessboard. Most people don't see her as much of a threat, but that combined with what she's capable of only makes her a more valuable ally than the General himself."

Azure let out an unamused huff. "Would you two stop keeping secrets from me and just tell me everything? What reason is there that you keep important information like this from me?"

"You're impulsive," Yellowtusk replied flatly, at the same time Peng said, "Because it's fun!"

Unfortunately for Mihou, the little comment had Peng turning around to shoot Azure a teasing look– not dissimilar to one Mihou himself would do to Wukong. The new angle, atop the platform on their way to the back of the throne, had allowed him the same full view of the room that Mihou had a few moments ago.

One that gave Peng a full, unobstructed view of the top shelf.

"YOU!" they yelled.

Mihou startled. He had expected it, yet he hadn't done or planned anything for when it did. He bundled the cat into his arms and leaped off the shelf. The books tumbled after him, but he was already out the open door.

Peng shoved the key into Yellowtusk's hand and took off after the small simian, blades ready, leaving their brothers in the throne room.

The hall that Mihou tripped on out to was large and dark, much like the throne room. There were apparently stairs that led up to said throne room that not only lacked rails, but also had bottomless pits on either side, and Mihou had better things to do than die.

Mihou ran down the steps, but in the process tripped over his own feet, and rolled down the rest of the way, curling around the cat in an attempt to protect it. When he hit the bottom, probably ending up bruised in several places, Peng burst through the heavy doors, sending them off their ancient hinges and into the abyss through the sheer force of their winds alone. After this, Mihou would be surprised if he'd be able to look at any bird normally ever again.

Mihou picked himself up and scrambled down the wide hall, but he'd barely made it past the first column when something came from above. Certain that it was Peng, Mihou threw himself onto the stone floor. Except it wasn't the demon.

The large axe finished its scarily swift arc, slamming into the opposite wall was a fear inducing quake.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me.”

A broken spear landed behind him, as if to remind him that he had no room for hesitation. Peng blocked a few more spears aimed for them before they went after Mihou again.

If Mihou took a moment to give the hall a onceover, he would’ve noticed the places where the brotherhood had nicked on their way to the throne room while avoiding traps. However, as was, Mihou could only run in a straight line and hoped that he was running fast enough to dodge most of the things that came at him.

Peng also found difficulty in the chase, mostly forgetting where the aerial traps were set in their determination to get to the monkey. Over the course of their brotherhood’s journey for the key and the Demon Bone Spirit General, they had taken to needlessly attacking every simian they had come across. All of them were animals that didn’t know any better and couldn’t fight beyond a pathetic attempt at an escape, and none of them provided the same satisfaction as winning against a certain Monkey King would’ve. Peng barely recognized the black simian companion of the Monkey King, but even if he wasn’t, his demise would be far more satiating than wildlife.

With a vengeful cry, Peng swiped a strong gust of wind at Mihou. It was intercepted by a horizontal stone column that had burst out of the wall, but the remaining strength was still strong enough to shove Mihou into another wall.

Mihou dragged himself into a sitting position, barely noticing the cat slip away from his arms. His side and shoulder hurt, one of his temples almost numb from the impact. His vision blurred back into focus as he watched Peng dodge several moving pillars from above. Mihou groaned, already forgetting the pain from adrenaline and bringing himself onto his feet, a hand on the wall to keep his balance. Something crinkled beneath his fingers, prompting him to turn. Mihou may not be a scholar like Sanzang or a history and legend nut like Wujing and Wukong, but anyone would’ve recognized the glowing gold sigil on the talisman paper.

Mihou didn’t have time to even consider what it could’ve been for when Peng’s wings flashed gold, extending in a clear threat, before barreling straight towards him. Mihou panicked and ripped off the talisman, backing away just in time for one of Peng’s blades to embed into the stone wall, though getting his poncho caught in the process. Peng raised their other blade, intent on going for Mihou’s head, when a stone pillar suddenly dropped on top of Peng. *Hard.*

Mihou panted, watching as Peng used his wings to hold up the structure. It was a pillar, like all the ones that they’d be dodging just a moment before, but this one was larger, heavier, more insistent. Where others retracted as soon as they reached a certain amount of opposition, this one continued to push down on Peng, intent on squashing him not unlike a bug. There was a small space just big enough for Mihou to not be included in the squashing, but if Mihou was any bigger, he would’ve been a smear on the stone anyway, and if Peng wasn’t holding up the pillar, his legs would’ve been pulverized.

Peng’s glare was still murderous, but both blades were now deep in stone and they were using it as support, their wings acting as shields and pillars to keep the demon from getting crushed. Mihou took it as an opportunity to get away, slipping out of his poncho and

shimmying his way off to the side. Besides small grunts of struggle, Peng didn't make a sound.

When he could finally breathe again, Mihou realized that the pillar had taken all the space of the hall, and that he was on the side leading back to the throne room, leaving him no choice but to run back the hall.

He was halfway up the stairs when Yellowtusk came out, probably looking for Peng after the sudden quiet.

Yellowtusk immediately noticed the pillar blocking the way and ran down to intercept Mihou. Mihou was exhausted. Everything was starting to hurt, but a second wind he will forever be grateful for had him just barely dodging the elephant's hammer or toppling off the edge of the staircase. Yellowtusk's movements were slower than Peng's, but they were still swift compared to Mihou; he'd only gotten lucky.

"I suggest you stop right where you are," Yellowtusk said. "I don't have the same grudge as Peng, but you know too much, and I have an inkling on who you're affiliated with."

"That's none of your business!" Mihou yelled, throat dry from exhaustion. His own voice sounded distant.

"And our business is none of yours."

Yellowtusk raised his hammer again, and Mihou wasn't sure if he could dodge. He curled his fists, unsure what to do, only to notice that he still had the talisman in his hand. As Yellowtusk brought down his weapon, Mihou ran forward and shoved the paper into his midsection, rolling down the stairs and feeling his brain knock around his skull. Mihou didn't roll down all the way, but he certainly wasn't feeling like taking another step, though his body insisted otherwise. There were complaints as he got his arms under him, but the pain felt like it had been pushed to the background. He heard Azure call for Yellowtusk, but he hadn't quite recognized the word as he had guessed. His mental capacity wasn't quite at its peak.

Mihou stumbled onto his feet, noticing that he'd landed next to the Yellowtusk's initial attack. There were a few talisman papers scattered around, probably having fallen from Yellowtusk's person. Mihou gingerly bent down to pick one up, distantly registering the similar sigils as the previous talisman he'd held.

"You've got courage, cub," Azure said. This time, Mihou heard him, though it was still through water. "I apologize for what my companions put you through."

Mihou turned to Yellowtusk, who was frozen midswing. He turned back to Azure, craning his neck to look him in the eye from the middle of the stairwell. "Apologizing? For what?"

"They are in the wrong. I do not wish to bring you pain. In fact, the Brotherhood's goal is to alleviate it. I can see you have potential. Incapacitating my brothers is no easy feat, yet you've accomplished that. I can tell that you have people who want to protect."

“How do you know that?”

“Your little conversation with Yellowtusk was telling enough. Your will is admirable, but I can tell that this was simply luck; You lack true power. I can give you that.”

“What makes you think I want that?”

“Who doesn’t, even moreso when they have something they want to fight for?”

Mihou squinted at Azure, trying not to appear scared in the face of him, like a prey animal.

Then, to his own surprise, he *laughed.*

There was a certain absurdity to the situation, he supposed. This all started because he wanted Wukong to get him some treats that only Ao Moang could make. He hadn’t meant to get mixed up in *Wukong* ’s business, because that was what this was, right, Wukong’s business? His brother was the one all wrapped up in this mythic nonsense, not him. The most Mihou had done was visit the Harbinger once, and that was for Wukong’s sake.

But that was what these people were offering him, right– A chance to protect Wukong?

Shame, then, that Wukong was perfectly capable of protecting himself, and Mihou was content with that.

“You’re the second person to offer me something like that today, you know?” Mihou asked.

Azure huffed, sounding amused. “You have potential. Anyone who doesn’t is a fool for missing your potential.”

“What happens if I refuse?” Mihou asked.

“I don’t think you will, but I can tell that power is not what you need right now. It’s a way out, correct? The portal behind the throne is still open.”

“You’re not going to stop me?”

“I don’t see any benefit in doing so. Think about my proposition.”

Azure stepped to the side, gesturing to the doorway. Mihou squinted at him, unsure whether or not he should trust him, but without any better choices, he cautiously made his way up the stairs until he was at the same level as Azure, who still made no hostile move towards him. In fact, he was smiling, like a parent towards their son.

But Mihou was not his son, and that made it all the more awkward.

Mihou continued the rest of the way to the portal, constantly throwing looks back at Azure, who kept nodding at him as if to encourage him forward. He tried not to think about it too much.

When Mihou hurried to the back of the throne, he was surprised to find the cat there, gnawing on a distinctive key that sunk Mihou's heart to the ground. He wrestled it away from the cat, only now noticing that he was trembling, and that everything was beginning to hurt, but paid both no mind, holding the key to the light of the portal. It was a odd thing, with too many teeth at the wrong angles and an excessively glamorous skull for a handle, but even without mystic knowhow, Mihou could sense that it was..powerful.

Mihou thought back to the Brotherhood, just for a moment. What if Azure had given it to the cat intentionally? But what if he hadn't? What if Yellowtusk had dropped it and the cat had somehow picked it up without him or Azure noticing? Mihou was absently aware that his decision would affect how the fate of the world would play out, but right now, exhausted and in pain, he couldn't be bothered to think about it too hard.

Mihou sighed and pocketed the key, picking up the cat, which he absently noted wore the ribbon it'd been playing with earlier like a leash, and passed through the portal.

=O=

The ghost of the casket didn't rise from the dead to bother him as he'd come back, thankfully enough. He still walked along the edge of the room, staying as far away from it as possible, though. Mihou ran all the way back to the lift in bursts of sprints, too. His body hurt too much for anything else. The lift was still unsteady, but at this point, he was too shaken to care.

When he'd gotten back to the basement level, he found his phone face down on the floor. He picked it up, finding that it'd been almost an hour since he found his way down here. That was his phone's last words as the battery hit zero. He didn't do more than grumble about it, though. He was cold, in shock, and probably injured enough to warrant him a visit to Wujing more than the cat.

Mihou made his way back up to the tuktuk, got the unfortunate reminder that he still had one delivery to do, and decided to suck it up and ask for directions.

The night was almost over. Just a little more.

=O=

"You look exhausted, dearie. Is everything alright?"

"Ni Ni Noodles," Mihou greeted, holding out the grannie's order. It was probably cold by now. Mihou only felt a little bad about it.

“Oh, thank you! Would you like to come in for some tea? You look like you’re about to fall over any second! Your cat looks like it’s about to slide off your neck, too.”

“I… I would like that, actually.”

Momo was the customer’s name. She was Japanese and of upper class, adding her to the long list of rich people that Mihou knew– his own family included. She was retired and lived with her staff and her grandson. She had an orange tabby named Peaches and he was the fattest cat Mihou had ever seen.

“There’s no way that’s healthy…” he mumbled, numbly holding the ice pack Momo had to the goose egg on his temple.

On the floor in front of him, the stray had chosen to fall asleep in Peaches’ pet bed, and instead of being mad about it, the orange tabby simply slept *on top* of the stray. Peaches was over three times the size of the black tabby, and though part of it was because the stray was bone thin, he was still significantly larger than a healthy cat. Mihou tried to shove Peaches off thes stray, but quickly found out that he wouldn't have the strength to move it if he was in peak condition, much less while injured.

“He’s such a sweetheart, isn’t he?”

“What happened to his fur?”

“Ah, it was from when he was a stray. My grandson caught a bunch of kids pouring boiling water all over the poor thing. Most of his fur grew back, but as you can see, he never quite healed all the way. My grandson has scars to match him, too…”

“Sounds like something Wukong would do,” Mihou mumbled.

“Ah, yes, Wukong. Such a dear, that one. He’s very good at being an older brother.”

Mihou blinked, then let out a tired laugh. “He is.”

“Are you actually his little brother?”

“Mm-hm,” Mihou hummed, leaning back on the couch and covering his eyes with his arm. His head hurt. “Unfortunately.”

Momo chuckled softly. “It really shows that he has experience with brats like my grandson.”

“Hey,” Mihou protested weakly, “I was an *angel* . *Wukong* was the troublemaker growing up.”

“You can both be troublemakers, darling. I’m willing to bet that it runs in your blood.

“How about your cat?”

“I dunno. She just started following me around earlier.”

“So she doesn’t have a name?”

“None that I know of.”

“I think I know this one; my grandson and Wukong complain about her all the time. She doesn’t like them very much.”

“Really, now? ‘Cause she caused me a *lot* of trouble on the way here. Sorry about your order, by the way.”

“Oh ho ho, don’t worry about it, darling. It got here eventually. Are you planning on keeping her?”

“Depends, are you planning on feeding her the same way you feed your pumpkin?”

Momo laughed. “Will you let me take her off your hands if I promise not to do that?”

Mihou chuckled and waved a dismissive hand. He knew that he wasn’t quite showing the proper level of respect, but he couldn’t care less at that moment. Everything ached, and he was low on energy, but he had to admit that this conversation was nice.

“I think I’ll name her Plums. After your cute plum bandage.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

=O=

Mihou was being shaken awake gently, something that Sun Ni could never do despite being a nurse.

“You friends are here to pick you up, Mihou,” Momo called softly, helping Mihou up into a sitting position. She handed him a glass of water to drink, which he didn’t have the energy to take, but had even less energy to refuse. “You should get checked out, dearie, you’re hurt.”

Mihou drank all the water in one long gulp, electing not to spend any more energy on retorting. “Thank you for having me.”

“It’s not a problem. Come back to visit, okay?”

.

“I can’t believe you got Puscal to let you pet her!!” Wukong complained, strapping Mihou into the backseat of the tuktuk, where they usually kept the order bag. Wukong had removed it and had Ao Lie carry it back to the store so that Mihou could be secure in the back. “I’ve been feeding that cat for years and it won’t even let me watch her eat!”

“Puscal?” Ao Lie asked.

“Pussycat rascal.”

Mihou snorted. Wukong flicked him in the forehead for that. “Shut up. I wasn’t the one who named her. It was that damned kid.

“Go back to sleep. You look exhausted. What, a few deliveries is too much for you?”

Mihou groaned, weakly swatting away Wukong’s long-gone hand. He was not going to wake up tomorrow, he decided. Bajie could work in the kitchen alone for a day.

“What were you even up to?” Wukong asked, though it was softer. “You wouldn’t be *this* tired from just deliveries.”

Rather than explain, Mihou reached into his pocket and handed Wukong the thing he brought out of it.

“...what’s this?”

Mihou, too tired to do anything else, shrugged and went back to sleep.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!